ROUTLEDGE STUDIES IN RELIGION AND FILM

The Holy Fool in European Cinema

Alina G. Birzache

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The tradition of the 'Holy Fool' is much neglected in modern study. This book resurrects that tradition and gives it a more contemporary appeal by tracing its provenance in significant aspects of European cinema. Engaging and accessible, this work should appeal to students of religion and of film, as well as to those who see culture as the locus for religious engagement and debate.

—Robert Pope, University of Wales Trinity Saint David, UK

This monograph explores the way that the profile and the critical functions of the holy fool have developed in European cinema, allowing this traditional figure to capture the imagination of new generations in an age of religious pluralism and secularization. Alina Birzache traces the cultural origins of the figure of the holy fool across a variety of European traditions. In so doing, she examines the critical functions of the holy fool as well as how filmmakers have used the figure to respond to and critique aspects of the modern world. Using a comparative approach, this study for the first time offers a comprehensive explanation of the enduring appeal of this protean and fascinating cinematic character. Birzache examines the trope of holy foolishness in Soviet and post-Soviet cinema, French cinema and Danish cinema, corresponding broadly to and permitting analysis of the three main orientations in European Christianity: Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant. This study will be of keen interest to scholars of religion and film, European cinema and comparative religion.

Alina G. Birzache was an assistant lecturer at the Faculty of Orthodox Theology in Bucharest before she moved to the United Kingdom where she obtained a PhD from the University of Edinburgh. She has interests in religious representations in art, literature and film and has published on these topics.

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Introduction
The Holy Fool in European Cinema

A young man gazes at a travelling wagon in the middle of a village square somewhere in central Europe. Defying the silent and almost motionless crowd gathered around, he ventures inside the vehicle to see the exhibition it hosts. Closely following the young man, the camera reveals that most of the wagon's internal space is taken up by an extraordinary exhibit: an enormous stuffed whale with decrepit skin like an old map bearing the marks of time, yet sporting open eyes that look almost alive. Fascinated by what he witnesses, the young man returns for a surreptitious nocturnal visit to see the leviathan. In this second scene the whale's penetrating eye unexpectedly appears as the focal point of the camera in a striking chiaroscuro close-up. After several long seconds during which we gaze into the beast's eye, the man's profile enters the screen from the side and addresses the creature with an inquisitive look, exclaiming: 'See how much trouble you have caused!'

These memorable scenes come from the Hungarian director Béla Tarr's art house film *Werckmeister Harmonies* (2000) which, at the dawn of the new millennium, generated much debate over its cryptic meaning. For some critics it seemed that János Valushka, the protagonist and young man in these two scenes, was playing a particular cinematic type—that of a holy fool.[1] What prompted such an identification? Even by his own admission director Béla Tarr has no religious faith.[2] But this does not mean that his meditations on the human condition are devoid of religious references. On the contrary, the image of the stuffed whale offers one of the most powerful cinematic metaphors of religious desolation in a film which is itself a meditation on modern society. How might this be possible?

A few words about the film will help to set the context. Its action is situated in a small village, somewhere in central Europe, within a pastoral landscape seemingly oblivious to the modern world, which is suddenly thrown into eschatological anticipation. The source of the commotion is the arrival of a strange wagon displaying 'wonders of nature': its greatest attractions being 'the world's biggest whale' and an enigmatic and malefic Prince. Frightened by alarming rumours of strange happenings that preceded the arrival of the wagon, no villager is able to summon the courage to enter the show. The sole exception is the village postman, János Valushka.

In spite of a lack of cues in the narrative, there are visual elements which render the film readable as an implicit commentary on the state of religion in the contemporary world. If the small village is taken as a microcosm, we see János as perhaps the only person of religious sensibility left in the community. He is the only one who demonstrates a genuine interest in the whale, which, for him, is far more than merely a stuffed exhibit. While the villagers understand its presence as ominous, for János it is a sign of divine mystery and creative power: 'How mysterious is the Lord that He amuses Himself with such strange creatures!' he exclaims. The framing of the creature's immobile but seemingly real eye in close up brings to mind representations of the all-seeing Divine Eye. If the beast is actually a metaphor for God, as has been suggested, then the state of a whale, stuffed and decrepit, appears to reinforce the idea of a dead God.[3] In this spiritual wasteland, the modern 'holy fool' Valushka is not a person of absolute religious faith, but rather the last human being in which the divine sense has not completely atrophied. His modernity, therefore, is indebted more to Nietzsche's 'fool' announcing the death of God, rather than to the older Christian hagiographic tradition of holy foolishness.[4]

Traditionally, the figure of the holy fool has appeared in Christian tradition as a counterpoint to mainstream society. Standing outside accepted social norms, holy fools have been well positioned to offer a powerful critique of contemporary behaviours and ideas. If Valushka represents a modern variant of the holy fool figure in cinema, does he also retain the critical function of his foolish predecessors? In Tarr's political parable Valushka's complex role is indeed grounded in the way he offers a novel vision to the world around him. The critical function is retained, even though it corresponds to the particular circumstances of his own epoch and place. First, it is through Valushka that the contrast between darkness and light becomes apparent, and a moral perspective is introduced. He is neither led by his instincts like the crowds that want to destroy every sign of civilization, nor by the theoretical intelligence of the ivory tower musicologist for whom he provides food and care. Valushka is guided instead by his heart and moral sense into attending to the needs of the others. Secondly Valushka's simplicity, appearing to the people as folly, stands out as a beacon of unspoilt humanity against the world around him. In contrast with his meek mode of being, other characters seem driven by ideologies, functioning as either manipulators or the manipulated. More dangerously, he exposes the conniving workings of the social and political powers at work while remaining essentially apolitical. In the film Valuska turns into a potential threat for the new political order, represented by Tunde, the wife of the musicologist whom Valushka looks after. Tunde sees Valushka as a threat: as one who observes her secret movements and destabilizes her obsession with violently enforcing 'order' and 'cleanliness', words suggestive of her fascist inclinations. In an allusion to the silencing of dissidents behind the Iron Curtain, Valushka is pursued by helicopters in a

surrealistic sequence, before being institutionalized in a mental hospital. Tarr employs his holy fool character in a way that allows him to offer a double critique: first against the social and political power structures that oppress the individual, and second against an abstract rationality that underpins these structures.

I have chosen Tarr's film for these introductory remarks because it provides an exemplary insight into the significance of the holy fool figure in European cinema and the questions to be investigated in this monograph. First, Tarr is using a recurring dramatic figure in European cinema: the holy fool, transformed for a modern context but still bearing the imprint of two millennia of religious and secular history. Second, Tarr's film is illuminating because it demonstrates how the critical function of the holy fool is being continually updated to meet the needs of contemporary society. Vanuska's function is to interrogate modern phenomena, including the resurgence of dangerous ideologies and the secularization of the world. Tarr employs his character in a Janus-like manner: both as an evocation of the spiritually void totalitarian ideologies which ravaged Central and Eastern Europe over the past century, and, with an acute sociological insight, as a warning that danger is never completely gone and vigilance is always required.

No matter how opaque a holy fool can appear in real life, once he or she is framed in a story, the character acquires a certain critical function within the narrative. This follows from the fact that the holy fool character is structurally unaccommodated to the ways of the world, hence his or her perceived foolishness. If the holy fool has always fulfilled a critical function, it is also the case that the function has been context-specific. The frequent use of the holy fool figure in European cinema reflects its versatility as a device for commentary on the world around us, and its deep-rootedness in the artistic traditions of the continent. This leads us to the central puzzle addressed in this monograph: How has the critical function of the holy fool developed across the European cinematic world?

Scholarship to date does not offer a wholly satisfactory answer. Although a great deal of attention has been paid to the holy fool as a hagiographic and literary character, the figure has received comparatively little attention in cinematic scholarship or in the field of film and religion. The holy fool has variously been classified as an anthropological, social, religious and literary type. It has been recognized only much more recently in cinematic typology as a distinct category linked to the imitation and representation of Christ.[5]Moreover, while the theatrical and performative elements of the holy fool have been recognized in theological and literary scholarship, these insights have not yet been satisfactorily applied in studies of film. This is surprising and unfortunate given the pervasive nature of the figure in European cinema. In the absence of an agreed definition of the cinematic holy fool figure put forward in film scholarship, this monograph will update the existing literature on film and offer a new model for understanding the figure and its critical function.

The problems with the existing literature fall into several categories. First, there is the problem of neglect. The classic study of madness in cinema, Michael Fleming and Roger Manvell's *Images of Madness: Portrayal of Insanity in the Feature Film*[6] seems to be innocent of the significance of holy foolishness in European film. The chapter on sanity as madness and madness as sanity discusses Frank Capra's *You Can't Take It with You* (1938) and Philippe de Broca's *King of Hearts* (1966) only in conjunction with contemporary psychiatric theories. Only the briefest reference to Christ the Fool is made to account for the foolish behaviour of the protagonist in Capra's film. A few years later the authors return with another article on the same subject, 'Through a Lens, Darkly'.[7] Even if Fleming and Manvell do not explicitly state that they are not going to address European cinema, it is rarely present and they focus almost wholly on Hollywood productions. They use three alternative concepts of madness: as human nature gone awry, as response to social injustice and as enlightenment. Holy foolishness might well have featured under the last heading had it not been overlooked. Nonetheless, when they write about madness as enlightenment their selection of films makes it clear that what they have in mind is not a transcendent source of illumination. This failure to establish a connection between the holy fool and the divine, and to develop discussion around the way in which modernity challenges the theological model, leaves us without the interpretative tools necessary to understand why the character type of the holy fool has flourished in modern cinema.

One of the greatest difficulties with the literature on film and religion scholarship is that, to the best of my knowledge, there is no explicit working definition for the holy fool. Lloyd Baugh labels them merely as 'extreme Christ figures'.[8] In *Imagining the Divine: Jesus and Christ-Figures in Film* (1997), he makes an inventory of what he calls 'essential dimensions and typical guises of the Christ-figures' in cinema, all united by a number of characteristics they share: a mysterious origin, reflecting the wholly Other; spiritual fatherhood; commitment to justice; miracle-working; conflict with authorities; sacrificial victim; God's intimate; the suffering servant; the shedding of blood; the *via crucis* and metaphorical representations of the resurrection. Out of all the Christ-figures he considers—the woman, the child, the priest, the saints, the outlaw and what he calls 'extreme Christ-like figures'—it is the fool, the madman and the clown which seem to be the most inexplicable. Yet in many ways, these three extreme figures are capable of replacing each other as a result of operating within a transcendental category: holy foolishness.

More recently, some film scholars have acknowledged the existence of the holy fool as an important cinematic device, but discussion is mainly centered on the analysis of a limited number of characters. They provide, however, valuable insights into the reasons for the rediscovery of the figure in modernity. Paul Coates in *Cinema, Religion and the Romantic Legacy* identifies two reasons for the contemporary interest by film directors in the

holy fool, as suggested by Lars von Trier's 'Goodheart trilogy'. First, as a 'relative of the mystic and a form of the free-speaking (unheard) conscience of Christendom', he suggests that the holy fool can be used as an emblem of a spirituality opposed to the establishment, an idea palatable to an increasingly individualistic society, confronted with a crisis of the religious institutions. The second argument begins from the holy fool's spiritual elevation as reflected in his daily disenfranchisement. The paradox he offers: utter abjection on the one hand and divine election on the other makes him a good voice to ask 'what compensation the order of things—be it social and cosmic—may offer the various disabled'.[9]

In *Images of Idiocy. The Idiot Figure in Modern Fiction and Film* the literary scholar Martin Halliwell identifies yet another reason for the existence of cultural representations of the holy fool figure in the modern era: It has been deemed suitable to provide modernist explorations into alternative modes of subjectivity and to satisfy the postmodern interest in fractured discourses.[10] In his opinion, the idiot upsets conventional logic by remaining outside organized language. This remark explains how madness and idiocy can be part of a common strategy since both are ways of transgressing rationally organised systems, be they social, religious, political or linguistic. While Halliwell and Coates helpfully identify the use of folly to expose problems with modernity, neither uncovers the whole morphology and radical critical function of the holy fool in a way that satisfactorily explains its pervasive nature in film. Instead, as will be explored in the course of this book, it is the critical nature of the holy fool, capable of adapting itself to many cultural contexts, that most plausibly explains the breadth of its reach in European film making.

In order to interpret the figure of the holy fool in the context of the past hundred years of the cinematic age, I will be using a number of hermeneutical techniques familiar to those working in the field of film and religion. Particularly influential have been the scholars Robert K. Johnston, Larry Joseph Kreitzer, Robert Jevett and George Aichele who have worked in recent decades at the interface of film and biblical studies to develop a hermeneutical method for reading religious motifs in film. They approach the relationship between film and scriptural texts from different starting points, but ultimately their endeavours could be described as falling under the umbrella of intertextuality. Intertextuality is taken here not as a single strategy but as a method of covering a range of readings, some similar to the traditional models of source and redaction criticism, and others more influenced by postmodern theories. What these theologians propose is that we must look back at the biblical text not through the authoritative eyes of particular commentators, but rather through the lenses of the literary or cinematic products it has inspired. In other words, meaning is supplied less through theological commentary, which is often in the background, and more through cultural interpretations. Each in their own way attempts to make sense of the cultural expression of a biblical event, theme or character,

seeing them in conversation with a particular culture and trying to privilege neither.

The attempt to avoid giving pre-eminence to either cultural expression does not necessarily mean putting them on a par, an approach only Aichele takes with a clear postmodern standpoint on the texts he analyses. In his turn, Robert K. Johnston states the customary position of the theologian who embraces film from a position of faith. He places the authoritative biblical text at the centre of the theological process, and continues by identifying four sources of meaning: the worshipping community, historical Christian thought and practices, the relevant culture and the personal experiences of the reader. As a component of culture, film can therefore be said to be a source of theological meaning.[11] In concrete terms, what he proposes in approaching film is a cultural hermeneutics: he starts from a cultural narrative outside Scripture and uses it as a lens to examine a specific biblical text.[12] He describes his method as a reversal of the typical hermeneutical flow, borrowing the expression from Larry Kreitzer. Kreitzer's approach is to resist selecting only a single narrative through which to examine Scripture, instead preferring a series of literary fictions and their cinematic adaptations, in which biblical ideas, themes and motifs are used and reworked.[13] Johnston's purpose is ultimately the same: to achieve an understanding of the 'diversity of meaning inherent in biblical text'.[14]

In his introduction to Kreitzer's *Gospel images in fiction and film: on reversing the hermeneutical flow,* George Aichele is the first to define this kind of approach as intertextual, in the sense that meaning is formed in the space created at the intersection of one text with another. While expressing a similar view to Kreitzer's when he asserts that the biblical texts are recycled in the various cultural forms and media available in each age, he subtly points towards a different agenda, his conclusions supporting the 'arbitrary and artificial character of every reading'.[15] In the Introduction to *Screening Scripture: Intertextual Connections between Scripture and Film* Aichele elaborates together with Richard G. Walsh on this approach: Scripture is seen as the precursor of later texts which rewrite biblical characters, themes, situations for a different culture. Each of these rewritings functions as an interpretation of the original text.[16] The role of the reader who makes all these connections between the texts is highlighted, in a shift of emphasis from the text itself to the reader as creator of meaning.

While these approaches start with the cinematic text in order to provoke a fresh understanding of Scripture, the method used in this book for exploring holy fools in film relies on a two-way hermeneutic. This path was paved by Robert Jewett, whose *Saint Paul at the Movies* projects an 'interpretative arch' with one end anchored in the ancient world and the other in the contemporary cultural situation. He seeks not new understandings of Scripture but analogies between the two points of comparison which can then illuminate certain aspects of contemporary culture. Jewett attempts a 'culturally contextual interpretation' from which he delves into

the historical and cultural contexts at each end of this dialogue across the centuries.[17] Jewett's methodology diverges, however, from the three scholars mentioned above since it proceeds towards interpretation from the opposite direction: using the past to illuminate the present rather than vice-versa. The two-way approach towards intertextuality has since been developed by Larry Kreitzer, who, placing himself within an interpretive circle, sometimes chooses to reverse the hermeneutical flow and consider the fresh perspective that each side can bring to the other. While Kreitzer's focus is on the literary reworking of themes and their cinematic adaptations, the nature of this investigation means that we must begin by examining the cultural history of the conceptual and performative interpretations of the Pauline text on which the holy fool is grounded. Establishing this will help to identify the hagiographical and literary traditions behind the cinematic holy fool, and to justify the legitimacy of what I argue are their present continuations. Once this has been outlined, the hermeneutical flow can be reversed, allowing the cinematic works themselves to revisit the Pauline text that lies at the foundation of Christian holy foolishness.

Tradition and intertextuality, therefore, work together in this monograph. How can these be resolved given that the latter seems to bypass a linear view of thematic development? Both aspects are necessary to form an understanding of the critical power of the modern cinematic holy fools. Tradition designates a set of observances, values and doctrines which taken together develop a way of being in the world and interpreting reality. Traditions originate in the past and come to shape the present, to various extents. This book, therefore, engages not only with different religious and cultural traditions but also with various geographical spaces in which tradition functions in a number of ways. Despite the truism that modernity has been eroding the grip of tradition, the situation is not so simple. Recently, for example, Russian culture has been in the grip of a reinvigorated Christian Orthodox tradition, as part of the post-Soviet search for a national identity. As a result, the past two decades have seen increased production of overtly religious films, many of which have received the approval of the Orthodox Church hierarchy.[18] On the contrary, in Western Europe, where the cultural space has become more pluralist, Christian religious traditions are receding from the public space and the cultural arena. In addition, religious and cultural traditions in Western Europe, which until the Reformation followed similar paths, are increasingly being rediscovered and breaking down Catholic-Protestant divisions. In order to set the correct context, therefore, for my discussions of the holy fool in various national cinemas, each chapter will contain references to the presence of the holy fool in the dominant religious tradition, before evaluating the extent to which the cinematic representations enter into a dialogue with each respective tradition. This will allow for an understanding of how the critical function of the holy fool has been applied across different national contexts.

The methodology of intertextuality also helps to overcome some of the problems associated with trying to trace influence. In the later twentieth century, 'influence' as a critical term seemed outdated as a result of its connection with ideas such as tradition and agency, which fell under critical scrutiny at the same time.[19] By contrast, intertextuality carries a note of impersonality, since the reader appears to be confronted with crossing a field of texts from which human agency has been expelled.[20] My approach could be described as intertextual, since I consider the holy fools in the selected films in relation to their possible precursors. However, my task is more complicated as a result of the lack of scholarly consensus over whether we can speak of a phenomenology of holy foolishness in Western Christianity. In order to clarify this question this book begins by reconstructing a history of holy foolishness across the European Christian world in its Eastern and Western dimensions. First, I delineate a portrait of holy foolishness as derived from what is considered to be its foundational text in the *First Epistle to the Corinthians*. I follow this by looking at the traditions that issue from the Pauline text. Only after establishing that the Western holy idiot is as legitimate an expression of holy foolishness as the *salos* or the *iurodivyi* is in Eastern Christianity can I move to analysis of the films in their own context of origin. In doing so I follow John Fiske's suggestion that: 'Studying a text's intertextual relations can provide us with valuable clues to the readings that a particular culture or subculture is likely to produce from it'.[21] Appropriated here is what he calls 'horizontal intertextuality', by which he understands the more or less explicit relations between primary texts that are usually linked along the axes of genre, character or content.[22] Even if Fiske articulates his theory in the context of media studies, particularly television, it is relevant to the current study which is driven by theme and character. The fact that this exploration includes a historical dimension allows for an analysis of the transfer or accumulation of meaning over historical time, with the figure of the holy fool viewed as the result of a process of sedimentation of meanings.

The cinematic investigation in this monograph is devoted to three national cinematic outputs, each chosen for their interest as contrasting European cultures. The concept of national cinema is currently a matter for debate, motivated by questions over the nature of national identity, and a sense that nations are more fragmentary and de-centered than usually imagined.[23] The usefulness of the nation as a heuristic tool for framing cultural specificity has also been contested, since the model of cultural unity and homogeneity it implies is challenged on the one hand by the complexities of the international film industries, the transnational movements of financial capital, and cultural globalization, and on the other by the diverse identities that can coexist within the boundaries of a state. One view is that it is more accurate to speak of local and transnational communities that film imagines.[24] While it may be granted that this approach has real merits when considering the

rapid move towards multicultural societies in certain nations, it is also true that the concepts of nation and national culture, even if constructed, still provide a mode of consciousness in which film functions as both a reflector and a mobilizer of the national ethos.[25] In Europe it is also the case that national film industries have long been shaped by the state, for both financial and linguistic reasons. And, as will be identified in the three national film cultures explored in this monograph, directors and producers are often very explicitly thinking of national issues and identity when framing their subjects and characterization.

The selection of films chosen for this study is shaped to an important degree by the idea of national culture because it provides a salient category for examining difference. In the European context, cinematic difference is defined not only by opposition to American Hollywood cinema, which is an international Goliath in relation to the relatively small national cinematic industries of Europe, but also by emphasizing the cultural specificity of one country in relation to others. Therefore, national cinema in Europe connects national individuality with particular cultural heritages, of which religion forms an important part. Religious traditions remain a significant form of cultural difference, even if the ideal of a single consensual tradition has waned recently, especially in Western Europe. It can be either overtly represented in its external manifestation or merely detected in less conspicuous forms. Out of the seven typologies Susan Hayward considers relevant for the enunciation of the 'national', two seem to me suitable for the transmission of religious traditions to the screen: the narrative, as culture's way to make sense of itself, and also 'cinema as the mobilizer of the nation's myths'.[26]

The three national cinemas examined in this book—Russian, French and Danish—have been chosen for the purposes of comparison. The selection enables a discussion of religious themes in European cinema across three key divisions in Christianity: Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant. The assumption here is that religion is part of the fabric of national specificity, seen both synchronically and historically, even if today it has limited capability of actively shaping policy or has been marginalized in the public sphere. In the three selected national cinemas religion is bound with nationality in somewhat different ways, which has implications at the level of representation. In Russia Orthodoxy is the dominant religion, presently attempting a position of partnership vis-à-vis the state and thereby acquiring an important degree of visibility in the public life as a social actor. Moreover, it is seen as an important component of national identity, emphasized by the long alliance between the state and the Church before 1917. While this has been revived following the introduction of *glasnost* in the second half of 1980s, one should not ignore the aftermath of the 1917 Revolution when the Russian Church was confronted not only with marginalization but also persecution, which changed the function of Christianity and made it a rare source of artistic inspiration.

In contrast with the privileged status the Orthodox Church is currently enjoying in Russia, in France and Denmark the situation is significantly different. Danish Lutheranism and the Catholic Church in France are being relegated to the private sphere and are reliant on their heritage to sustain their identities. In Denmark, however, which has been much less subject to those periodic outbursts of secularism which France has experienced since the 1789 Revolution, Lutheranism has remained a state religion, and more than eighty percent of Danes claim to be members of the national Church.[27] In France, by contrast, the republic has defined itself around secularism and the concept of *laïcité*, epitomised by the law on the separation of the churches and the state passed in 1905. In spite of this, a majority of French continue to consider themselves culturally Catholic, even if they are not regular worshippers.[28] Furthermore, in both countries the two forms of Christianity constitute important cultural traditions stretching back centuries, forming modes of identity that continue to appear in cinematic representations of religiosity.

This comparative model, based on the use of national cinemas, can provide important insights into the way religious themes are treated across the European cultural space. In this book, this model provides an opportunity to examine how holy foolishness has developed in different contexts out of its Pauline roots. At the same time, it is also important to delineate the limitations of this approach. I acknowledge that directors may work within more than one national context. Two figures prominent in the book, Andrei Tarkovsky and Carl Theodor Dreyer, directed films at various times outside their own country, independently of their own national cinematographic industries. However, it is important that we should not dismiss these films as wholly alien to the director's national cinema. The reason lies in the importance of the personality of the director as auteur and as the product of a certain cultural environment bearing more impact than the means of production. In some cases, nonetheless, the changed location of filming can be said to affect the director's treatment of his native culture. For instance, this translation from one cultural space into the other coincides with a stylistic change in Dreyer, which brings him closer to the Catholic iconographic conventions in *The Passion of Joan of Arc*, while Tarkovsky's final depiction of the holy fool in *The Sacrifice*, made in Sweden, transgresses the traditional Russian canons of representation. By the same token, the Dogme 95 films analyzed in this book can be considered within a larger trans-national context.

In terms of the analysis of the films and figures under consideration, this book supports those theology and film scholars who have drawn attention to the fact that film has its own specificity as an art.[29] While narration is important, the image and the sound also contribute to the process of meaning-making, sometimes to a significant degree. My analysis of each film will be driven by theme and character but equally important will be the relation between theme, narrative form and stylistic technique. Holy

foolishness is constituted of paradoxical elements, including its transgressive, inverted aesthetics and its adversity towards discursive reasoning. Is this reflected at the level of narration and stylistic technique and if so, how? In order to answer this question particularly useful will be Bordwell's considerations with regard to art-cinema and parametric narrations. If, in art-cinema narration, the relation between *fabula* (story) and *syuzhet* (plot) is characterized by an increased loss of causality, in parametric narration the situation is complicated further by the introduction of the concept of style which 'creates patterns different from the demands of the *syuzhet* system'.[30] More importantly, style creates its own logic. However, unlike those neo-formalist critics for whom thematic implications are irrelevant, I consider these concepts useful tools for investigating how the theme can sometimes imprint its 'foolishness' at the formal level.

In this monograph, therefore, a number of techniques will be used to locate the critical functions of the holy fool in European cinema. Drawing from recent scholarship in the fields of film and religion, the monograph will use a model of intertextuality to compare the cinematic functions of the holy fool with the development of the figure in the Pauline texts and later Christian writings. This will be coupled with a strongly contextual approach, using the comparison of national cinemas to open a new view of how the holy fool functions across different confessional traditions in Europe. Analysis of the films will be based on a model of directorial autonomy, such that I pay particular attention to the way in which each director creates meaning through his characters. These approaches will provide a strong framework for evaluating the continuities and discontinuities between the cinematic holy fools and their predecessors, in the process revealing new insights into the characters' durability and relation to modernity. In so doing, the morphology and critical functions of the holy fool will be illuminated, even where these have been embedded in particular cinematic techniques and shaped by national cultures.

The structure of this exploration of the holy fool in European cinema reflects these methodological considerations. The world of cinematic holy fools is multilayered, a result not only of the idiosyncratic visions of various directors but also of the ways they draw on different European confessional or cultural traditions. Synchronic variations across religious and national divides are naturally to be expected, in spite of the increasing globalization of the new age inaugurated by the Lumière brothers. To understand these previous forms, however, and to unlock the ways in which they have developed as a result of historical and cultural changes, we need to uncover the origins of the holy fool as a figure in European culture and performing art. For this reason the opening chapters are dedicated to the phenomenon at large and its interpretation.

The first chapter—*The Pauline Holy Fool and Its Successors*—provides an historical account of the genesis and evolution of the idea of holy foolishness in European Christianity. The chapter opens with an analysis of

the biblical text that is considered foundational for the practice and theory of holy foolishness: the apostle Paul's *First Epistle to the Corinthians*. My aim is to highlight the countercultural thrust of the Epistle. Rather than setting out in search of a univocal meaning of the biblical text, I highlight its versatility in covering a range of meanings, depending on the cultural assumptions within each society. This potentially enables the reader to develop a cultural critique based on the text at any point in time, by appropriately updating the meaning of Paul's argument. This argument, running through the first four chapters of the Epistle, has at its core the 'message of the cross' which inverts all human values, and therefore elevates the foolish, weak and base things of the world. The meaning of his paradoxical foolish wisdom is revealed in the fourth chapter of 1 Corinthians where Paul speaks in more concrete terms, indicating that the model for the foolishness he preaches is the apostles themselves, whom he places at the bottom of the social hierarchy and in the midst of all depravations. Holy foolishness, therefore, is not another theory of knowledge but takes on an experiential meaning, in which the body participates through sharing in the suffering of the lowest and most despised of the world. Crucially, St Paul relates this experience in theatrical terms, with the apostles becoming a spectacle for the world, an allusion picked up in the Byzantine practice of holy foolishness. With these foundations established, the chapter explains how the idea of holy foolishness was developed through patristic and medieval sources into a cultural form.

Having established the main parameters of the Christian idea of holy foolishness, I turn to its use in performative practice, focussing particularly on the holy fools in the Byzantine and Russian traditions. The chapter proceeds by demonstrating that their practice is actually based on a literal interpretation of the fourth chapter of the *First Epistle to the Corinthians*. Following this, I highlight the differences that appeared when the phenomenon was translated from Byzantium to medieval Russia. In the meantime, it will be argued, the Latin West was developing its own interpretive tradition whose prototype was St Francis of Assisi. A scholarly variant is represented by the holy idiot, who captures the imagination of theologians as an anti-scholastic figure. In the remainder of the chapter I will explain how the holy fool, through these prototypes, came to be redefined as a means of confronting modernity, therefore ensuring the survival of the concept and the practice of holy foolishness into the late-nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and thereby into the cultural language of filmmakers.[31] To this purpose I will highlight the importance of three nineteenth-century figures who most significantly updated the model for a modern context: Dostoevsky's idiot, Nietzsche's fool and Kierkegaard's knight of faith.

Refashioned in this way, the holy fool was ready to confront modernity as witnessed in various European cinematic traditions. To evaluate this development, and how it affected the critical functions of the holy fool, the rest of the book will focus on three contrasting national cinemas

from different ends of the continent. Given the Christian origins of the holy fool in Europe, these choices reflect different confessional cultural spaces: Russian cinema as significantly indebted to the Orthodox confession, French cinema's reflection of a Catholic heritage, and Danish cinema drawing on a Protestant cultural tradition. For the first of these national explorations, I investigate Soviet and post-Soviet Russian cinema: an area in which the traditional model of the holy fool has influenced the culture in a singular way. The second chapter: *Speaking Truth to Power: The Holy Fool in Soviet and Russian Cinema* therefore draws heavily on the traditional paradigm of the holy fool, but at the same time deals with figures that are not hagiographical, with the introduction of the category of 'stylized' holy fools. The cinematic material is thus divided into films that use the hagiographic figure of the *iurodivyi*, which offers the possibility of a study in iconology, and other films that rework the figure, adapting it to their own purposes while making use of its culturally charged inheritance. The first category of films employ the holy fool as an historical figure, without much innovation, drawing on the traditional role of the figure as an antipode to the tsar and antidote to his autocratic policies: a political role whose significance is explicated within the religious-nationalistic narrative known as the 'Russian idea'. There is one notable exception: Pavel Lungin's *The Island* (2006). Primarily a film promoting Orthodox spirituality, *The Island* also uses the voice of its protagonist to admonish the slackness of the Church at the spiritual level and the brainwashing of the individual by the secular Communist state of 1970s. The 2009 film *Tsar* by the same director demonstrates how holy foolishness has become a recognized idiom in Russia, to the extent that it can be employed for deceptive purposes. More 'stylized' versions of the figure tend to bear the mark of the Soviet era: in these films the religious content had to be evacuated and the *iurodivyi* became a trope through which to make a social and political critique of the Soviet state.

Perhaps the greatest of these Russian directors, Andrei Tarkovsky, will be singled out in the third chapter, as a result of his outstanding contribution to the modernisation of the figure. Holy foolishness is a recurrent theme in his work, running through *Andrei Rublev* (1969), *Stalker* (1979), *Nostalgia* (1983) and *The Sacrifice* (1986). I trace the development of the theme in Tarkovsky's cinematic imagination, which progressed towards a modernization of the holy fool. Part of this modernization, I argue, is a drive towards a universalization of the figure, distilled down to its elemental religious significance as a figure of absolute faith. Tarkovsky begins his cinematic career with a holy fool refashioned in a traditional mould and ends with a type of existentialist holy fool with the attributes of a saviour. In order to support this interpretation I outline the affinities between Tarkovsky and Christian existentialism, and particularly the significance of the philosophy of Søren Kierkegaard. Reading Tarkovsky through a Kierkegaardian lens will help to illuminate Tarkovsky's critique of rationality in the

modern age, and his use of the holy fool figure to launch a radical attack on contemporary society.

Having explored the Russian space as characteristically Orthodox, in the fourth chapter, *The Suffering Fool in French Cinema,* I move to compare and contrast the function of holy foolishness in the French Catholic world. After pulling together various theological and cultural strands, we will see that the dominant note of holy foolishness in the French world is to be found in the notions of self-sacrifice and suffering, embedded in a gloomy view of human nature. In visual terms the suffering body becomes a locus of meaning. The chapter uses Pascal's approach to faith as a way of accessing French cinema. The holy fool appears as a person of absolute faith for whom suffering acquires a redemptive quality. This question is addressed through two works of Rohmer, *Perceval* and *My Night at Maud's*. I will then cast a look at two portrayals of holy foolishness in the 1980s, when French cinema witnessed a significant increase in the number of religiously themed films. Alain Cavalier's saint in *Thérèse* (1986) offers a luminous contrast to Maurice Pialat's guilt-ridden priest in *Under Satan's Sun* (1987), but both are linked by the common theme of self-inflicted suffering. Suffering and foolishness are again connected in Marion Laine's more recent *A Simple Heart* (2008).

My fifth chapter is dedicated to the religious figures of the great director Robert Bresson who lend themselves to an interpretation as holy fools, including the surprising apparition of a donkey as a symbol for holy foolishness. Bresson's theological vision will be explored as part of an argument that his holy fools gradually evolve in his art from Catholic models (as in *Diary of a Country Priest* and *The Trial* of *Joan of Arc*) towards non-traditional, ethically problematic forms (as in *The Devil, Probably*). However, it is Bresson's Jansenistic imagination which accounts for the overly pessimistic turn in his later works. Ultimately the Bressonian holy fools are the innocent victims of a society which seems to be beyond redemption, and from which they attempt to escape. As in the French films explored in the preceding chapter, the function of Bresson's holy fools is to reveal through their suffering the injustice and immorality of an uncaring world.

To complement the Russian and French perspectives, Danish cinema, the subject of the final two chapters, will be taken as a means of exploring a Protestant-influenced cultural space. The opening section of the sixth chapter *The Fool's Challenge to Reason in Danish Cinema* sketches the Danish religious context, highlighting the different theological stances taken on human reason in Denmark and how they can be interpreted as an oblique discourse on holy foolishness. This is then examined in the cinematic context, in which special attention will be given to the directors Carl Theodor Dreyer and Lars von Trier, whose work is particularly marked by the theme in *The Passion of Joan of Arc*, *The Word* and *Breaking the Waves,* respectively, whereas different feature films (Gabriel Axel's *Babette's Feast*,

Anders Thomas Jensen's *Adam's Apples*) will be treated independently of their author's personality. With most of these films, the possibility of an alternative spiritual reading insinuates itself towards the climax, when a miraculous event or a decisive act performed in the hope of the 'impossible' casts a new perspective on the whole narrative. In the Protestant and particularly the Scandinavian context of Danish cinema, holy foolishness acquires two critical functions: first, it is used as a means to deconstruct worldly power structures, and, second, it becomes a way of signaling the presence of another kingdom to come—a radically different order most commonly revealed in a metaphor as the reverse of the present world.

The final chapter: *Idiocy as Technique: the Dogme 95 Movement* traces the vestiges of idiocy within the Danish Dogme 95 cinematic movement and uncovers the significance of this rediscovery of the idiot figure: not as a figure of entertainment but as something more profound. With Dogme 95 and its emblematic *Idioterne/The Idiots* (1998) directed by Lars von Trier, who was the mastermind behind the whole movement, the idiot figure made a spectacular return into the limelight in European film, though in a far from triumphalist sense. We will see that the return of the figure of the fool in the Dogme films *The Celebration* (1998), *The Idiots* (1998), *Mifune* (1999), *The King is Alive* (2000), *Truly Human* (2001) and *In Your Hands* (2004) signified a return of transcendence in the cinematic world as an affirmation of reality beyond the visible. This transcendence cannot be conceptualised or articulated but only intuited, which is why it comes to be expressed through the means of idiocy. Transcendence is no longer predicated on the inconvenient position of oppressive authority, a setting to which it was condemned by postmodernism. Under the mask of idiocy, the 'truth' for which the Dogme 95 movement claimed to be striving is to be found in extreme humility.

In this final chapter it becomes clear that we should view Lars von Trier and the movement he initiated within the phenomenology of the holy fool paradigm. The advantage presented by this interpretation is that it can allow us to reconcile two apparently contradictory dimensions which frequently appear in discussion of the movement: the irony and the seriousness of the whole Dogme 95 project. While holy foolishness preserves playful elements, seriousness is rescued by reinterpreting this 'game' on a higher metaphysical level. In this new context, the critical function of the holy fool is, therefore, to indict the loss of the transcendental dimension of life in modern society, and to call attention to those on the margins of this world, excluded by their nonconformity.

By way of conclusion, it will be possible to reevaluate the pervasive nature of the holy fool in contemporary cinema. By comparing and contrasting the wide variety of holy fools in European cinema and their critical functions, it will be possible to uncover which are indebted to traditional moulds, and which retain only a loose similarity to their precursors, noting the extent to which each model is a reflection on the Pauline figure

in a particular way. In those forms which would not necessarily be easily recognizable to St Paul, the holy fool still holds an ethico-religious function in cinema, adapted to the contemporary context. As seen in the final chapter, the critical power of the figure promises to surprise and challenge conformity in the cinematic medium for some time to come.

NOTES

1. John Orr, "Béla Tarr Circling the Whale," *Sight & Sound* 4 (2001): 22–24; Jonathan Romney, "Werckmeister Harmonies," *Sight & Sound* 4 (2003): 32–33; Peter Hames, "The Melancholy of Resistance: The Films of Béla Tarr," *Kinoeye* 1.1 (2001), accessed October 11, 2010, http://www.kinoeye.org/01/01/hames01.php; Alan Pavelin, "Werckmeister Harmonies," *Talking Pictures*, accessed October 11, 2010, www.talkingpix.co.uk/ReviewsWerckmeisterH.html#Alan; Ian Johnston, "Seeking Order in Disorder: Béla Tarr's 'Werckmeister Harmonies'," *Unspoken: Journal for Contemplative Cinema* (2009), accessed October 12, 2010, www.unspokenfilmjournal.wordpress.com/i-tarr-contents/seeking-order-in-disorder-bela-tarr's-werckmeister-harmonies; Michael Wilmington, "'Harmonies' Depicts a World Out of Joint," *Chicago Tribune* (December 28, 2001).
2. Béla Tarr, "In Search of Truth: Béla Tarr Interviewed," Interview by Phil Ballard, *Kynoeye* 4.2 (2004), http://www.kinoeye.org/04/02/ballard02.php
3. Alan Pavelin, "Werckmeister Harmonies."
4. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1974), 181–182.
5. Lloyd Baugh in *Imaging the Divine: Jesus and Christ-Figures in Film* (Kansas City: Sheed & Ward, 1997) appears to be the first scholar to acknowledge the character typology of the Christ-like figure in cinema. This does not mean that the term has not been used before him to describe certain cinematic characters.
6. Michael Fleming and Roger Manvell, *Images of Madness: Portrayal of Insanity in the Feature Film* (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, London: Associated University Presses, 1985).
7. Michael Fleming and Roger Manvell, "Through a Lens, Darkly" in *Dionysus in Literature: Essays on Literary Madness*, ed. Branimir M. Rieger (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1994), 49–57.
8. Baugh, *Imaging the Divine*, 219–220.
9. Paul Coates, *Cinema, Religion and the Romantic Legacy* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), 90–91.
10. Martin Halliwell, *Images of Idiocy. The Idiot Figure in Modern Fiction and Film* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), 51.
11. Robert K. Johnston, *Reel Spirituality: Theology and Film in Dialogue* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2000), 85.
12. Robert K. Johnston, "Beyond Futility: American Beauty and the Book of Ecclesiastes" in *The Gift of Story: Narrating Hope in a Postmodern World*, ed. Emily Griesinger and Mark A. Eaton (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2006), 88.
13. Larry Joseph Kreitzer, *Pauline Images in Fiction and Film: On Reversing the Hermeneutical Flow* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 29.
14. Larry Joseph Kreitzer, *Gospel Images in Fiction and Film: On Reversing the Hermeneutical Flow* (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 16.

15. George Aichele "Introduction" to *Gospel Images in Fiction and Film: On Reversing the Hermeneutical Flow*, by Larry Joseph Kreitzer, (London: Sheffield Academic, 2002), 8.
16. George Aichele and Richard G. Walsh, "Introduction: Scripture as Precursor" to *Screening Scripture: Intertextual Connections Between Scripture and Film*, ed. George Aichele and Richard G. Walsh (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2002), ix
17. Robert Jewett, *Saint Paul at the Movies: The Apostle's Dialogue with American Culture* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 8–9.
18. Most notably **Nikolai Dreiden's The** *Angel's Aisle* **(2008),** Vladimir Khotinenko's *The Priest* (2009), Alexander Proshkin's *The Miracle* (2009).
19. As modernity enters the stage, tradition in a broad sense, as a constellation of practices and beliefs, is beginning to lose its sway. Its erosion might be said to have started in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, encountering powerful opposing forces during the Enlightenment. However, here, tradition, as well as influence, is used in the strict sense applicable to the literary sphere. The notion of influence, like that of tradition, seems to share the same fate. While it was central to the literary criticism of the eighteenth and nineteenth century, it began to be challenged in the twentieth century and was superseded by a new term coined by Kristeva in 1966. Intertextuality came to express better a relation between texts which is not predicated upon an authorial intention. Moreover, in a boost for the future of intertextuality, the writer's agency and centrality came under attack with Barth's theory of the 'death of the author' in 1968.
20. Jay Clayton and Eric Rothstein, eds., *Influence and Intertextuality in Literary History* (Madison and London: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 4.
21. John Fiske, "Intertextuality" in *Popular Culture: Production and Consumption*, ed. C. Lee Harrington and Denise D. Bielby (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 219.
22. Ibid., 219.
23. Stephen Crofts, "Concepts of National Cinema" in *The Oxford Guide to Film Studies*, ed. John Hill and Pamela Church Gibson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 386.
24. Andrew Higson, "The Limiting Imagination of National Cinema" in *Cinema and Nation*, ed. Mette Hjort and Scott MacKenzie (Routledge: London, New York, 2000), 64.
25. For the relevance of the category of the national cinema with regard to the cinematographic productions of Russia, France and Denmark, see the arguments developed in "Russia Cinema—National Cinema. Three Views" in *Russia on Reels: The Russian Idea in Post-Soviet Cinema*, ed. Birgit Beumers (London: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 1999), Susan Hayward, "Defining the 'National' of a Country's Cinematographic Production" in *French National Cinema* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005), and Tytti Soila, Astrid Söderbergh-Widding,and Gunnar Iversen, "Film Production as a National Project" in *Nordic National Cinemas*, ed. Tytti Soila, Astrid Söderbergh-Widding and Gunnar Iversen (London; New York: Routledge, 1998).
26. Hayward, "Defining the National," 9.
27. Kirkeministeriet, accessed May 2, 2011, http://www.km.dk/folkekirken/statistik-og-oekonomi/kirkestatistik/folkekirkens-medlemstal.html
28. Kay Chadwick, "Catholicism and Protestantism" in *Encyclopedia of Contemporary French Culture*, ed. Alex Hughes and Keith Reader (London: Routledge, 1998), 92.
29. Melanie Wright, *Religion and Film: An Introduction* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006), 22–7; Steve Nolan, *Film, Lacan and the Subject of Religion: A Psychoanalytic*

Approach to Religious Film Analysis (London: Continuum, 2009), 131; Christopher Deacy, "The Pedagogical Challenges of Finding Christ Figures in Film" in *Teaching Religion and Film*, ed. Gregory J. Watkins (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 29.

30. David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (London: Routledge, 1985), 275.
31. By modernity I understand here the period that historically started with the Enlightenment and intellectually is defined by a questioning of the traditional foundations of society.

1 The Pauline Holy Fool and Its Successors

> We fools counted their life madness, and their end to be without honour. How are they numbered among the children of God, and their lot is among the saints!
>
> St Ciprian, *The Treaties*

One of the most striking aspects of the holy fool in European culture is its ubiquity: the figure appears in various guises across many nationalities and traditions. This is made possible because of the protean nature of the figure, for holy foolishness is a concept that can hold different emphases depending on the particular cultural background. Rather like a medieval palimpsest, new meanings are frequently grafted onto older forms. It is no surprise, therefore, that many of these variegated forms of holy foolishness have percolated into the modern cinematic medium. If, however, we are to account for the functions and attractions of the figure across such a wide cultural space, we need to understand its origin and development. By unpicking the cultural and religious roots of the figure, it will be possible to understand how contemporary forms have sprouted out of older traditions, accommodating and adapting to particular national and cultural contexts. This is particularly true when interpreting the modern critical functions of holy foolishness, which, I argue, need to be read through their common origin in a shared religious tradition. Before we can begin to analyse its impact in modern cinema, we therefore first need to explain the roots of the concept. This chapter will map the holy fool from its earliest appearance, through its development in various European contexts, in order to explain its entry into the twentieth-century cinematic world.

To understand the roots of holy foolishness in the European cultural space, we need to return to the very earliest expressions of Christian belief. The theological context of the idea stems from the concept of foolishness for Christ, expressed in the Epistles of St Paul, which justified the flouting of social and intellectual conventions for religious ends. For the early Christian communities, this became a powerful and practical theme, first in the context of widespread persecution, and later through the development

of monastic and ascetic practices. With the spread of Christianity across Europe, the concept of divine folly percolated widely into different cultural spaces, developing distinct forms in Eastern (Orthodox) and Western (Roman or Latin) Christian traditions. This chapter will unpick these developments, beginning with an analysis of the theological roots of the concept, as offered in the opening four chapters from *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*. This Epistle is a frequent reference in later hagiographic accounts featuring holy fools and I will pay particular attention to the way in which St Paul endowed holy foolishness with a critical function. With this outlined, the chapter will explain the theoretical and practical interpretations of holy foolishness as developed by Christian communities in both Western and Eastern Europe. The overview will conclude by looking at the reconfiguration of these religious traditions for a modern age in the writings of the nineteenth-century thinkers Kierkegaard, Dostoevsky and Nietzsche. These writers, I will demonstrate, updated the holy fool's critical function in profound ways that were to shape the profile of the cinematic holy fool in the twentieth century and beyond.

THE FIRST EPISTLE TO THE CORINTHIANS AS A FOUNDATION TEXT FOR HOLY FOOLISHNESS

Although there are striking examples of unconventional asceticism by the Jewish prophets, it is in the New Testament, and specifically in *The First Epistle to the Corinthians,* that the idea of holy foolishness is explicitly explained. In the Old Testament the themes of wisdom and folly can be frequently encountered in prophetic and sapiential literature, but wisdom is always identified as God's attribute, while foolishness is only ascribed to His people.[1] Apart from the basic meaning, rooted in the classical Greek, of deficiency in understanding and judgment, in the Old Testament the term acquires contextual meanings that range from a lack of true knowledge of God, to rebellion against Him and blasphemy.[2] Much of the New Testament follows in the same tradition, until we reach the Pauline Epistles. Remarkably, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* stands out as the only text in the whole of Scripture that speaks, through a radical redefinition of the term *moria*, about the 'foolishness of God' as manifested in Christ crucified.[3] Moreover, 'foolish' and 'fool' (*moros*) are turned on their head to designate the authentic mode of Christian existence. The *Epistle* also contains an explicit injunction that came to form a reference for the practice of holy foolishness first recorded in the fifth century in Constantinople: 'If any man among you seemeth to be wise in this world, let him become a fool, that he may be wise.' (3:18). St Paul's exhortation, denoting more than a taste for paradoxical verbal constructions, was predicated on the message of the Gospels. On this account he fashions himself as a 'fool for Christ'.[4] How can we explain Paul's radical redefinition of foolishness in the Epistle?

A first look at the context behind the composition of the Pauline Epistles illuminates the reasons for such a strategy. They are linked to the apostolic proclamation as form, content and practical consequence. The 'preaching of the cross' lies at the heart of the *kerygma* of the early church and is tellingly encapsulated in the Pauline letters and particularly in his *First Epistle to the Corinthians* (1:18). Why would the apostle provide such a reminder to a community already familiar with the narrative of the Gospel? While the message of the crucified Saviour was the driving force of the apostolic proclamation, it also had the potential to be offensive to a culturally alien audience. As a result, the risk arose of the message losing its centrality in church life. This is exactly what happened in Corinth, where a composite Christian community made up of Jews and Gentiles, mainly of rather low wealth but also belonging to the social and political elite, was embracing a 'self-sufficient, self-congratulatory culture . . . coupled with an obsession about peer-group prestige, success in competition, their devaluing of tradition and universals, and near contempt for those standing in some chosen value system'.[5] This infiltration of the secular ethos had affected the very core of the apostolic proclamation. As a result St Paul designed his letter to challenge his opponents in Corinth, who were attempting to water down the offence caused by the cross.[6] He also seized the chance to sum up the various attitudes that rejected the message of the cross, spelling out their serious soteriological implications.

The first four chapters of 1 Corinthians reveal St Paul preoccupied with explaining his own understanding of true wisdom (*sophia*), which in his view takes the form of the folly (*moria*) of the cross. At the heart of this distinction is a critical attitude towards the conventions of the world. The overriding theme of this Epistle is the reaffirmation of the entirely different system of values and the new spiritual realities brought about by the cross and the resurrection.[7] Directly subordinate to this is the issue of the lack of communion amongst the members of the church in Corinth. Paul is also, however, aware there is some opposition to himself: for this reason the first four chapters acquire a justificatory tone, with the apostle finding himself in a position from which he needs to defend his own missionary activity.

Paul starts by assessing the reasons for the state of conflict that has arisen in the community between the various factions aligned to different preachers. In Paul's view, those listening to his vision of a *kerygma* centered on the folly of the cross can be divided into believers and non-believers. First, he reminds the Corinthians of two categories of audience that have a negative response to the message of the cross and points out the nature of their objections. For those of Jewish origin, who are trained to look for signs of divine intervention, Christ crucified is 'a stumbling block', contradicting their messianic expectations. For those from Greek culture, who value wisdom, the cross can only appear foolish, lacking conformity with the standard criteria for wisdom, be they formal or substantial. The Corinthians belong to neither of these categories since they are those who 'are sanctified in Christ

Jesus, called to be saints with all who in every place call on the name of Jesus Christ' (1:2).

Yet there were doctrinal tensions between the rival factions destroying the unity of the church in Corinth, apparently rooted in a conflict about social status between the cultured elite and their subordinates.[8] Paul seems to allude to this when he writes that 'not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble are called' (1:26). His assertion demarcates two opposing groups in terms of wisdom and power. As a consequence, his discourse is meant to deflate the arrogance of the cultured and powerful elite by exposing their claims to wisdom and honour as matters alien to a spirituality centred on the cross. Hence the apostle begins his argumentation by announcing that God made foolish the wisdom of the world (1:20). Since human wisdom could not lead to salvation, it pleased God to achieve this through the foolishness of the message preached (1:21), which he further clarifies as having at its core 'Christ crucified' (1:23). This foolishness of the cross conceals the true divine wisdom, which is wiser than that of humankind (1:25). Therefore, God has chosen the foolish and the weak things of the world in order to put to shame the wise and the mighty (1:27). Divine wisdom takes on a mysterious quality, being 'the hidden wisdom which God ordained before the ages for our glory' (2:7). The Corinthians might seem wise, but in order to be truly wise they need to become 'fools' (3:18).

Biblical scholars have tended to read this passage either in terms of the ideological variances expressed or the socio-political allegiances of different parties. As a result, the scholarship on 1 Corinthians 1–4 has witnessed an ongoing debate about the meaning ascribed to 'wisdom' (*sophia*) by the community of Corinth, seeing it as vital for understanding the Pauline argumentation about the foolishness of the cross. The main approaches have interpreted *sophia* variously as: Greco-Roman rhetoric or sophistry (Witherington, Pogoloff), Gnostic wisdom (Bultmann, Schmithals, Wilckens, Winter, Barett), a Jewish wisdom tradition (Windisch, Dupont, Conzelmann, Feuillet) or an Hellenistic Jewish wisdom in the tradition of Philo of Alexandria (Horsley, Pearson, Davis).[9] Other scholars have favoured a political and social interpretation, with the result that the Corinthian conflict is read less in terms of knowledge and more in terms of power. On this scheme the divisions inside the community were not primordially theological but rather socially determined.[10] Subscribing to Raymond F. Collins's assertion that 'the search for a particular kind of wisdom' is 'a search that does not admit of resolution', it is helpful to adopt an inclusive position which sees the ideological and the social aspects behind Paul's message as interrelated. This reflects a set of concepts that work in tandem: first, wisdom and power, and secondly, foolishness and weakness: each entering a parallel relationship. However, these two alliances are ultimately upset by an inversion strategy which reveals the foolishness of God to be His wisdom, and His 'weakness' as power.

Given the competing interpretations of 'worldly wisdom' in modern scholarship, it is worth reconsidering what Paul wanted to convey to his first-century audience. Is 'the foolishness of the cross' dependent on an accurate grasping of the meaning of 'wisdom' as practiced in Corinth, with which 'the folly of the cross' then enters into a dialectic relationship? In fact, in his argumentation Paul consistently takes as a point of reference divine wisdom (or by the same token divine folly) against which all comparisons are made. Even if all the full meanings ascribed by the Corinthians to the word 'wisdom' were identified, this would not explain what divine wisdom is, but rather would delimit it from what Paul thinks it is not. In other words, placing wisdom and foolishness in a dialectic relationship does not render the folly of the cross dependent on worldly wisdom for sense-making purposes. On the contrary, it is the folly of the cross, which St Paul takes as divine wisdom, which remains constant, while worldly wisdom is variable and unsecured. Scholarly disagreement over the precise historical meaning of worldly wisdom does not, therefore, preclude an understanding of divine folly. The lack of any precise qualification for worldly wisdom in Paul's text has the singular advantage that it can be ascribed a variety of contents, without ever rendering the opposition void: from the perspective of the cross, with all its existential implications for the Christian mode of being in the world, all human intellectual or moral achievements are found to be lacking.

Read in such a way, the critical nature of Paul's treatment of folly becomes apparent. The 'message of the cross' is used critically to expose worldly wisdom and worldly power, both of which are aligned with social status, and, therefore, detrimental to unity and devoid of salvific qualities. In order to make this argument Paul places the wisdom of the world and the wisdom of God in an antithetical relationship. This is emphasised by a paradox: the wisdom of God is foolishness from the point of view of human wisdom, just as worldly wisdom is foolishness from the point of view of divine wisdom. Paul repeatedly insists that God has inverted all human values: the cross has shown worldly wisdom to be foolish and rendered conventional weakness powerful. Weakness is given a positive value because it is through the cross, a symbol of weakness and shame, that God has disclosed his wisdom.[11] The cross is the culmination of Christ's *kenosis* whereby He temporarily gave up his divine power (Phil 2:7). The force of this argument, and its effect on his readers, must have been electric. Paul's rhetorical display is from beginning to end a matter of constant offence to his audience: from highlighting Christ's shameful death on the cross to disparaging what the Corinthians held most dear: wisdom, power and honour. The reversal of conventional values is presented as an act of divine irony: frustrating all expectations, it pleased God to save mankind through the foolishness of the cross. He has chosen the foolish, weak and base things to shame the wise, so that 'no flesh should glory in his presence' (1:29). This strategy of reversal ensures that lofty things are concealed in the low in a discrepancy

that would become important for the kind of challenge that foolish wisdom poses. In a deeper sense the reassignment of new meanings to old concepts by reversal expresses the liminal condition in which one finds oneself poised between the temporal world and the coming kingdom of God.[12] St Paul's critique of the world is achieved through the 'foolishness of God' manifested in the cross both in an epistemic sense—the cross defining the reality–and in a salvific sense, determining human fates.[13]

Once Paul has established these new Christian values, he urges the Corinthians to practice them. He/she who wants to be wise has to become foolish, challenging the conventions of the day. The apostles are presented as models since they are indeed 'fools for Christ's sake' (4:10). If thus far the argument in the Epistle has been fashioned in rather abstract terms and with paradoxical meanings, St Paul now moves to explain in very concrete terms the low social status of such a 'fool' as himself. With irony and sarcasm, he places the apostles in stark contrast to the privileges enjoyed by the Corinthians who are held in honour for their wisdom and social status. If they are ironically called 'kings' (4:8), the apostles are instead placed at the bottom of the social hierarchy, as people to be deprived of everything, even of their own life: 'For I think that God has displayed us, the apostles, last, as men condemned to death' (4:9). While the Corinthians are called wise, strong and distinguished, the apostles are, in stark contrast, foolish, weak and dishonoured (4:10). In addition they share in a state of total deprivation and abjection: They suffer from hunger and thirst, are poorly dressed, beaten, homeless, earning their own living by work, reviled and persecuted (4:11–12). In conclusion, from the point of view of worldly wisdom, the apostles seem worthless and disposable as filth (4:13). St Paul enumerates in his description all the foolish, weak and base things that he previously stated that God used to put to shame the wise and the mighty (1:27–28). In fact, by the same strategy of inversion he used earlier, utter abjection comes to designate high status in the divine order. Through the 'catalogue of afflictions' that beset the apostles, St Paul outlines the portrait of a new kind of fool, the 'fool for Christ'.

The critical functions that the 'fool for Christ' possesses are often overlooked. The customary image is one in which the apostles enjoy a position of centrality and authority within the church, being the focal point from which spiritual life overflows. Yet, by adopting the guise of a holy fool, Paul introduces a position of marginality that gives force to the countercultural thrust of his argument against the church in Corinth.[14] The Corinthians form a church that has become well-established in their religious beliefs and practice, even if the apostle considers them as still 'babes in Christ' (3:1). If we uphold the thesis that the conflict created in Corinth is not exclusively doctrinal but relates to the pursuit of social status, what Paul means by 'worldly wisdom' is therefore a set of cultural assumptions that regulate life in the community. Such worldly viewpoints do not originate in a cruciform vision of the Christian life. In other words, they are the product of a religious

belief adulterated with secular notions of self-interest and self-promotion. Consequently, Paul rejects all such worldly values that have been newly accommodated in the church as alien to a cross-centered spirituality.

In adopting the critical pose of the fool, Paul also endows the figure with a performative dimension that was to have important consequences for its later development in European culture. The social situation of the apostles described by St Paul is very similar to that of the marginalised and outcast in Greco-Roman society. The term *moros* that St Paul uses is the same that designated the emblematic figure impersonated by mimics in antiquity.[15] The use of theatrical imagery: 'for we have been made a spectacle to the world, both to angels and to men', suggests that the apostle had in mind these professional fools that entertained the crowds in the ancient world. Indeed, L.L.Welborn argues persuasively that this is indeed the apostle's strategy: According to him, St Paul makes recourse to theatrical language in order to place himself inside a well-established tradition of jest and mime.[16] By adopting such a low social status and a dishonourable persona, Welborn argues, Paul responds to some members of the church in Corinth, who first called him a 'fool'—*moros*—in comparison with the eloquent and cultivated preacher Apollo. The dilemma Paul initially faced was that by not responding to the insult he would have implicitly accepted relegation to a social category which had no voice in Greco-Roman society except as an object of ridicule in mime shows.[17] Yet rejecting the charge and calling himself a wise man—*sophos*, would also have meant accepting the values and criteria of the rich and learned in Corinth. What he does instead is admit to being a fool while redefining the term through a strategy of inversion whereby it acquires a new paradoxical sense predicated on Christ's cross and doing justice to his mission as an apostle. He therefore puts forward 'a personal form of the concept (μωρός) as the truth of his life, now understood in a deeper, paradoxical sense.[18] However, his argumentation has more than personal implications, since foolishness becomes here a characteristic of authentic Christian life.[19]

The traditional concept of the *moros* in the Greco-Roman world draws on different traditions, yet cumulates in a number of important features which will resurface throughout this book. First, Paul's readers would have been alive to the way in which the term reflected a counter-cultural position from which to criticise authority. The philosophic, literary and dramatic traditions of the classical world endowed the concept of *moros* with 'a grotesque perspective'.[20] The mimic, often an individual stigmatised by physical deformity and whose obscenity flaunted conventional decorum, was authorised by his low status to speak truth to the people in authority without the repercussions that a higher status figure would have incurred. His punishment instead was administered on the spot in the form of slapsticks. He had a critical function, giving voice to popular thinking that contained elements of resistance to the elites in power.[21] Moreover, the mimic was the inheritor of an earlier tradition in which a grotesque outsider could act as a critic

of authority.[22] In the same manner, adopting the guise of a despised 'fool', St Paul could challenge the conventional wisdom of those in authority in Corinth.[23]

A second dimension is related to the way that *moros* is endowed by Paul with a new standard for truth-telling. There is a philosophical precedent here, notably through Socrates who, as a wise fool, cultivated the paradoxical in appearance, behaviour and argument.[24] As Welborn suggests, Paul can be said to have followed a Socratic precedent in making himself and his manner of speaking an object of parody, and by adopting a divine perspective as result of his experiences.[25] In this 'comic-philosophic tradition', Welborn contends, one can encounter the three specific elements of St Paul's argument: divine initiative in the reversal of conventional wisdom and foolishness, the recognition that this reversal is revealed to some while hidden from others, and thirdly the acceptance of irony as the authentic mode of relationship to a world unaware of the divine reversal. Where Paul transforms this concept of foolish truth-telling, is in the way he identifies it squarely with the Godhead. The concept of the foolishness of Christ crucified implies a new critical function and standard of truth-telling. The example of Christ's ill-treatment and humble status are used to give the holy fool a religious context which mutates his/her significance into something more profound. The holy fool's mission is now not simply to utter common-sense truths, or even to stand up for doctrinal and moral truths (which are ultimately forms of truth rationalized by the human mind), but to oppose any deviation from the crucified Truth. This embodied Truth, made real by Christ, renders relative all the other forms of truth that arise in the human mind, so that the presence of the holy fool is always challenging and subversive.

These critical and performative dimensions are important because they can explain some of the trajectories of the evolution of the holy fool in European culture. In the development of ascetic holy foolishness in the Christian world, the phenomenon bears obvious similarities with the ancient mimes.[26] If Paul's appropriation of a foolish persona is chiefly a matter of rhetoric, it remained for these early Christian ascetics to turn it into practice. In many cases, Paul's view that understanding Christian Truth also presupposes sharing in the humiliation and suffering to which Christ was subjected is brought to the fore in the figure of the holy fool. It is to the development of this practice that I now will turn.

HOLY FOOLISHNESS IN THE PATRISTIC TRADITION

How did Paul's explanation of divine folly in *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* develop into such a pervasive theme in the Christian world? We have seen how Paul's use of folly was indebted to a classical, performative tradition, but in his theological argument it was turned into a powerful

critical tool through which he could attack the conflicts that were dividing the church of Corinth. The key issue here is not the motivation behind these conflicts, but the meaning that St Paul ascribes to wisdom and why he criticised the kind of wisdom that prevailed in the church of Corinth as detrimental to the spiritual life of the community. In what follows I will explore interpretations of 1 Corinthians and its relevance to the development of the concept of holy foolishness in the traditions of the early Church. Once established, the chapter will explain how these traditions began to diverge in Latin and Orthodox Christianity, and endowed different critical purposes on the holy fool in Eastern and Western Europe.

How pervasive in the early Church was Paul's refashioning of the ideas of wisdom and folly? It is apparent that the early Greek commentators inherited from the New Testament at least two meanings for 'wisdom'. One designated the natural wisdom of the universe which had preoccupied the pagan philosophers; the other was grounded on an identification of Christ with the wisdom of God. Most theologians wanted to reconcile the two and argued that Christ was the fulfilment of ancient philosophy.[27] For example, Theodoret of Cyrus (393—c. 457) dropped any sense of opposition between different kinds of wisdom, and instead in a commentary on *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* argued that they are complementary:

> (Paul) speaks of two wisdoms or even of three . . . one wisdom is the one given to men, which makes us to be reasonable beings and to discern the moral quality of our actions; it also allows us to discover crafts and sciences and to know God; the second wisdom is contemplated in creation . . .; the third is manifested to us by our Saviour, and is called 'folly' by the unbelievers.[28]

It was deep within the monastic tradition that Paul's view of the tension between worldly wisdom and God's wisdom was kept alive. For example, in a commentary on the same Epistle, the monk and scholar St John of Damascus (676–749) identified the 'wise according to the flesh' (1:26) with those who were considered wise according to 'appearance, to the present life and to pagan education' and opposed to them the uneducated, through whom he believed that God had conquered the world.[29] It is interesting to note that St John of Damascus is more concerned with showing the apostles to be uneducated rather than foolish. However, a more complicated picture had begun to take shape as early as the thought of St John Chrysostom (347–407), who developed this idea in a different direction with profound implications for the Byzantine and Orthodox traditions of Christianity. Commenting on 1 Corinthians 1:18–21 he writes that:

> . . . the cross is beyond reason . . . and it has an indescribable power.
>
> For since, in the wisdom of God, Paul says, the world did not know God through wisdom, the cross appeared . . . He made the things that

> can be seen so that by reasoning from them we might worship their maker (Rom 1.20) . . . since the world did not wish to know God through this wisdom, he persuaded men through the apparent foolishness of the gospel, not through a process of reasoning but through faith.
>
> . . . And in fact the apostles went forth not in wisdom but in faith and they proved wiser and loftier than the pagan wise men, inasmuch as receiving the things of God is greater than mounting arguments. This gift transcends human understanding.[30]

In Chrysostom's discussion, he indicates that the human mind is incapable of grasping the meaning of the cross. Reason was potentially capable of making correct judgments about natural law but in spite of this rationality alone could not forge a strong relationship with the divine Creator. As a consequence, God sidelined reason when he decided to persuade mankind of redemption through the (apparent) foolishness of the cross. The apostles did not make use of pagan wisdom but ultimately proved wiser than the pagans as a result of their faith. In this reading Chrysostom suggests that Christ's cross becomes the province of faith alone. When interpreted through human reason, Chrysostom is saying, the cross is foolishness; but it ceases to appear so from the standpoint of faith. I will show later that Kierkegaard reached very similar conclusions many centuries later. As a result, it is important to dissect the meaning that St John Chrysostom ascribes to the fools for Christ:

> Now he becomes a fool unto the world, who slights the wisdom from without, and is persuaded that it contributes nothing towards his comprehension of faith. As then that poverty which is according to God is the cause of wealth, and lowliness, of exaltation, and to despise glory is the cause of glory. So also the becoming a fool maketh a man wiser than all. For all, with us, goes by contraries.[31]

Chrysostom points out how Christian existence is caught within a network of paradoxes. The way to achieve something, he suggests, is to do or to be the very opposite of our rational instincts. The kingdom of heaven is revealed to be the reverse of this world. The more one distances oneself from this world the more he/she becomes empowered in the other world. One's knowledge of God increases while one's worldly knowledge decreases. In this sense the fool for Christ becomes equivalent with the unlettered person of faith: 'But the Cross wrought persuasion by means of unlearned men; yea it persuaded even the whole world. (. . . .) And of all men it made philosophers: the very rustics, the utterly unlearned.'[32] This interpretation was later to find resonance in the Western anti-scholastic movement during the Middle Ages.

In Latin Christianity Tertullian (155–240) was one of the most fervent defenders of the tension between the two wisdoms, but his was not a popular position. According to André Derville, the patristic traditions in the

Latin world saw interpretations of 1 Corinthians 1–4 develop along two axes: firstly, the folly of destitution, weakness and humiliation, in defiance of a proud wisdom; and secondly, a folly of the cross inviting suffering and opprobrium in response to the foolish love of Christ the Saviour.[33] The latter did not exhibit a voluntary renunciation of one's mind as it would have under the guise of a madman or an idiot. It is rather an affective mysticism in which the emphasis is on overflowing love for the suffering humanity of Christ expressed as participation in his passions. This kind of affective mysticism is little known in the Eastern tradition, where mysticism mainly took the form of apophaticism or negative theology.

The Western patristic commentaries on the first four chapters of *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* do not elaborate on the issue of the foolishness of God in relation to the cross, preferring instead to reduce the discussion to two terms: human wisdom in opposition to God's wisdom. The scandal and the excessiveness of the cross are left in the background.[34] Based on 1 Corinthians 1:30, Christ becomes the master of all true wisdom and philosophy. Returning to the classic Old Testament dichotomy, the fools are those who follow the false wisdom of the world, whereas the wise are those who follow Christ to the point of the martyrdom. Derville notes that most patristic commentators in the West fashion the discussion in a pedagogical manner, ensuring there is a smooth transition from the best of human wisdom to the wisdom of Christ, which attenuates the rupture between the two.[35] In this way the Pauline radical opposition between the two wisdoms became less polarised, taming the critical function that the fool held in the Pauline text. These different patristic interpretations ensured that the development of the holy fool in European Christianity took different trajectories, with a much stronger emphasis on the performative aspect in the Byzantine and Orthodox worlds, which entailed a more open and public challenging of social and religious norms.

HOLY FOOLS IN ORTHODOX CHRISTIANITY: THE BYZANTINE AND RUSSIAN TRADITIONS

For the Alexandrian theologian Origen (184–253) all Christians were fools by virtue of their faith: 'We who believe are foolish in the sight of the world'.[36] Appreciation of the counter-cultural nature of Pauline folly was no doubt strong for those living under the pre-Constantinian era of persecution, especially for one such as Origen whose father was martyred for his faith. Yet the performative aspect of holy foolishness reached its maturity in a later era of Christian culture when professing Christianity was a social norm not a deviance. The experiential nature of holy foolishness, in which the fool participates in Christ's suffering, was most vividly realized under Orthodox Christianity, where there emerged a special category of saints: the fools for Christ's sake. The term can also be applied to ordinary monastics

and lay people who practice *salia* or *iurodstvo*—the Byzantine and Russian terms most commonly used to designate folly for Christ's sake.[37] Generally the Byzantine holy fool, and to a lesser extent the Russian holy fool, exhibit an outlandish quality as a result of reinterpreting the Pauline injunction to become fools in a totally idiosyncratic way. It is intriguing that this Byzantine interpretation was novel and marked a departure from earlier patristic commentaries on 1 Corinthians 1:4, where the term *moros* was taken in a purely metaphorical way, with no reference to an actual performance along the lines of the professional fool in the Greco-Roman world. Yet in the Byzantine hagiographies 1 Corinthians 3:18 is indicated as the biblical source of inspiration for divine folly.[38]

A closer look at 1 Corinthians 4 demonstrates that the Byzantine interpretation of holy foolishness actually relies on a very concrete, literal interpretation of St Paul's injunction to become a fool. 'We have been made a spectacle (theatron) to the world' was an observation that would have evoked to contemporaries the Greco-Roman theatres and the dramatic representations and games that took place there. For the Byzantine holy fool in particular, though slightly less so for its Russian counterpart, the theatrical element is very important. The life of the holy fool has an increased public exposure when compared with the hermits of the desert or the monks and nuns living as recluses in the monasteries. From this point of view he/she is very similar to the professional fool for whom the public space was vital. One of the most important hagiographic conventions is that the fool's madness was feigned. The holy fool would put on a mask of foolishness, which would unjustly attract people's contempt and even aggression. The mask enabled a play with appearances, a play between concealed sanctity and manifest depravation. It was the human aspect of the paradox manifested in the Pauline idea of foolish wisdom: From a human perspective the saint appeared sinful and foolish, but from God's viewpoint his performance was an act of sharing in Christ's sufferings and humiliations.

The marginal nature of the holy fool was also emphasized, drawing on the Pauline text: 'We are weak . . . we are dishonoured. To the present hour we both hunger and thirst, and we are poorly clothed, and beaten, and homeless' (1 Corinthians 4:10–11). In order for divine foolishness to be credible its practitioner needed to be a stranger, always on the way and unknown to the community in which he/she was performing his/her antics. Never well integrated into the social structure of the community, the holy fool was destined to a position of marginality, therefore being deprived of any power or authority conferred by membership of a religious hierarchy. In terms of dishonour Dargon argues convincingly that the hidden sanctity of the Byzantine fool was a reaction against the ostentatious holiness of the monastic that was transformed into an honourable person by his recognisable virtue.[39] Symeon of Emesa (sixth century), for instance, not only behaved like a madman but, while keeping on his monastic garment, he allowed himself to be seen in the company of prostitutes and eating sausages

(forbidden under fasting rules) on Maundy Thursday. His secret feats of self-abnegation, including the fact that he had attained a state of complete dispassion or that he had not eaten anything for the whole prior period of Lent, remained unknown. Here we see reworked to its full effect the common hagiographic motive of the secret servant of God whose sole *raison d'être* was to humble the religious by revealing the existence of laymen worthier than themselves.[40] If we examine the list of tribulations that Paul offers as criteria for the life of the fools for Christ, it is obvious that all the physical depravations enumerated there were applicable to the *salos* and *iurodivyi*, who by their vagrant and provocative lifestyle made themselves vulnerable to both deprivation and ill-treatment.[41] Some of them even went beyond these criteria, wearing few clothes or going naked to expose themselves to the elements. Since humiliation of the self, suffering and derision were accepted as a form of asceticism, they were not only welcomed but deliberately provoked through scandalous behaviour. As Paul noted, 'Being reviled, we bless; being persecuted, we endure; being defamed we entreat' (1 Cor 4:12–13). Sanctity was only to be discovered at the end of their lives; if revealed beforehand, they would often flee to another place where their feats were unknown.

The oldest Byzantine hagiographical writing that features a holy person feigning madness is Palladius of Galatia's anthology of the lives of the desert ascetics, the *Lausiac History*, written around 420.[42] This featured a female fool living in a convent at Tabennisi, who never spoke and was confined to the kitchen where she faced the contempt of the entire community, only to disappear immediately after her holiness was revealed. Her role seems to have been to teach both the nuns and the great ascetic who had discovered her, a lesson in humility. The word *sale,* used for the first time to indicate this type of foolishness, was different from the *moros* so often used by St Paul in his *First Epistle to the Corinthians*. It is significant, however, that the episode from the *Lausiac History* was to be later entitled 'The one who simulated folly (*morian*)', using the Pauline term, which emphasizes their synonymy. It was *salos* though that was to become the technical term to designate the fool for Christ in the Byzantine world and which later would expand its semantic field towards madness. It is worth emphasizing that the initial semantic overlap between madness and idiocy is in accord with the general view held by the authorities in law and medicine until the sixth century, where no clear distinction was drawn between cognitive disability and mental illness.[43] These attributes were united by virtue of a common denominator: a lack of understanding. This proto-holy fool comes very close to 'the blessed idiot' or *blazhenny* from the Russian culture, which manifests itself as intellectual and physical simplicity and lowliness.[44] However, the Russian term today generally used to designate a holy fool is *iurodivyi* which, if not its original meaning, in its later form moved towards the semantic field of madness. Significantly, this reconceptualization is very similar to St Justin Martyr's understanding of *moria* as *mania*. In his *Apologia,* written

in the second half of the second century, with reference to *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, he described the offense caused by the cross as madness (*mania*) rather than foolishness (*moria*).[45] And indeed the excessively provocative behaviour of the later fools permits the same semantic slippage of foolishness into madness—for Christ's sake.[46]

In the sixth century, we find emerging a proliferation of accounts detailing the lives of holy fools: Evagrius's *Life of Symeon* (of Emesa), Leontius of Neapolis' *Life of Symeon* (arguably a different one), John of Ephesus's account of Theophilus and Maria, and *The Life of Daniel of Skete*. These accounts introduced two new elements: the performance moves to cities and open spaces, while the feigned madness is accompanied by a feigned immorality. For instance, Theophilus and Maria, children of an eminent man of Antioch, assumed the role of a mime actor and a prostitute respectively, performing drolleries and buffooneries and making fun of the priests in the city of Amida.[47] The most scandalous of all such antics were found in Leontius of Neapolis' *Life of Symeon*, which recounted episodes offering myriad instances of behaviour that verged on obscenity.[48] In contrast to Palladius's *sale* who lived in complete self-effacement, this kind of *salos* was, through his antics, a constant source of annoyance and offence for their contemporaries, being the best illustration of the 'scandalous prankster' type.[49] We can see here a more aggressive strategy adopted by the holy fool. However, their outrageous behaviour was a form of self-humiliation and ascetic endeavour since it was supposed to attract all kinds of physical punishments. This paradoxical, quasi-promiscuous quality of holiness has come to be seen as specifically Eastern.[50]

How did this tradition come to influence Russian Christianity? Nikephoros's tentht century *Life of St Andrew the Fool* seems to have a particularly important role in spite of being a literary construct.[51] First, it records Andrew's vision of the Protecting Veil of the Mother of God in 911, which was to inaugurate a special feast day in Constantinople, and secondly, it seems to be the first life of a saint that reached Russia and was most probably taken as a model for its successors.[52] Many of the details of Andrew's life became commonplace in the accounts of Russian holy fools: he was considered incurably mad, walked naked, slept in the open, behaved like a half-wit, but at the same time he was endowed with extraordinary gifts of discernment and prophecy. Through his awe-inspiring spiritual gifts and bodily mortification, he became the prototype for 'the terrifying ascetic'.[53] The first indigenous Russian holy fool—*iurodivyi*—is considered to be St Isaak Zatvornik in the eleventh century, a hermit of the Monastery of the Caves at Kiev. The era when this phenomenon reached a climax was, however, in the sixteenth century. This was a time when the church hierarchy turned a blind eye to abuses and injustice and the critical function of holy fool became incredibly powerful, used as a device for the oppressed to protest against autocratic power.[54] The most venerated fool of this period was St Basil the Blessed. He was believed to have appeared nearly twenty

years after his death to Tsar Ivan the Terrible (1530–84) in order to admonish him. A comparison with the lives of Byzantine fools is welcome at this point because it reveals that two important emphases had been added to the initial paradigm once translated to Russia: clairvoyance and political criticism.[55] As the obscene elements and concealment subsided, we see miracles and instances of prophecy increase which preserves the uncanniness of the figure. Since political absolutism was also on the rise in sixteenth-century Russia, the holy fool acquired a political function as well.[56] He became an authorised voice that could admonish the Tsar by virtue of his special spiritual status.

The controversial, even outlandish, behaviour of the hagiographic holy fool in Orthodox Christian culture demands some clarification. In the previous section I showed that, far from having a different source of inspiration, such holy fools were practicing the themes of 1 Corinthians 1–4 in a very literal manner. Paradoxically, such a literal interpretation of Paul's arguments transported them into a symbolic realm. Theologically, the extraordinary behaviour of the holy fools came to be seen as a symbol and intimation of Christ's Kingdom to come. This eschatological dimension gave the fool added critical power, providing a basis from which one could not only attack the current social order but also point to the radically different world to come. A Kingdom in which the foolish, the weak and the base things are held in high regard appears to human reason as something absurd, and at best governed by a para-logic inaccessible to conventional reasoning. But, as Paul argued, Christ's cross showed the wisdom of God to be foolish from the standpoint of reason. As a result the Kingdom is governed by the logic of foolish wisdom, a logic which the sixth-century theologican Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite described as 'irrational and mindless'– the 'Cause of all mind and reason, and all wisdom and understanding'.[57] It is interesting that it is Dionysius, the father of negative theology, who picks up St Paul's suggestion in a way that paradoxically associates foolishness with wisdom instead of simply substituting foolishness for wisdom.[58] This appears to have been the concept that the Russian scholar George P. Fedotov used when he wote that: '*Salia* always remains irrational—a disinterested impetus to madness which claims a religious motivation'.[59] It is irrational because symbolically it has been lent something of the impenetrable quality of God's wisdom.[60] The holy fool does not behave in the conventional manner in which holiness is popularly conceived, which then frustrates our understanding.

The Kingdom of God comes across as a radical change, for which reason it appears in opposition to the conventions of the world. The holy fool, by performing the inversion of values that Paul explains at length in his Epistle, represents this counter-world. He/she therefore develops an eschatological function[61], and the kingdom he/she reveals is a realm of the paradox and of 'the possibility of the impossible'.[62] This explains the holy fool's paradoxical appearance: He/she is to be found in the most abject postures because these are, in a reversed order, invested with power—the power of the cross (1 Corinthians

1:18). In order not to be viewed as absurd, this Kingdom entails a new understanding. In the Orthodox world, therefore, holy foolishness came to be understood as the renunciation of the fallen mind in order to reach a new perspective similar to that of St Paul: a phenomenon described by Orthodox theologians as *metanoia*, the change of mind. This newly acquired perspective affirmed the primacy of the age to come[63]. From this perspective everything worldly is relativized while the Kingdom of God is absolute, which sets the two worlds in a radical opposition. It is in this sense that the maximalism of the holy fool in the Orthodox world has to be understood.[64] Within Russian Christian culture, in particular, the holy fool never became a supporter of a respectable middle or happy medium. The critical function of the fool therefore resided in its antagonistic actions rather than through any sense of compromise.

HOLY FOOLS IN THE CHRISTIAN WEST: THE LATIN TRADITION

The vast majority of theological studies on the subject of holy fools take for granted that the Byzantine and Russian cultural worlds held a monopoly over the paradigm. One reason is the fact that only the Eastern Church sanctified this kind of spiritual endeavour. As a consequence all other forms have been measured against the models offered by the Byzantine *salos* and the Russian *iurodstvo* and have generally been found wanting. It is notable that even those studies that acknowledge the existence of holy fools in the Western Church adopt this stance. For instance, John Saward's *Perfect Fools* strives to demonstrate the existence of an equivalent Western phenomenon to the Eastern model, similarly devotional in nature. The evidence that Saward provides cannot, however, always perfectly match the Eastern phenomenon, although points of similarity can be traced with religious figures such as the Irish ascetics, St Francis of Assisi (1181–1226), Philip Neri (1515–95) or Jean-Joseph Surin (1600–65), each of whom exhibited behaviour in common with the follies of the Orthodox holy fools, but are hard to reconcile into a single category. What seems to have prevented such follies being taken as signs of holiness in the West was a certain sense of self-respectability and gravity, which can be clearly inferred from St Bernard of Clairvaux's (1090–1153) interpretation of holy foolishness as 'a joyous game, decent, grave, and admirable'.[65] The idea of a 'joyous game' alerts us to a different emphasis in Western Christianity. Whereas in the Orthodox world holy foolishness came to stand for counter-cultural madness, in Catholic Christianity the holy fool was associated with simplicity and childlikeness. The literature of early monasticism furnishes us with numerous examples of these distinct, though closely related, kinds of 'holy unwisdom': namely folly for Christ's sake and holy idiocy.[66] Using Saward's terminology, the first of these—folly for Christ's sake—involves a renunciation of conventional rationality and the exhibition of a form of madness, while

the second—holy idiocy—is a state of mind below rationality, involving a simple experience of faith and the created world.[67] On this scheme of understanding, the holy idiot and the fool for Christ become different modalities of exploring holy foolishness as, respectively, spiritual experience on a personal level and spiritual strategy on the social level.[68]

Insomuch as the Western Christian tradition saw in the holy idiot a more acceptable form of the fool for Christ, this was in line with the evacuation of the notion of brazen foolishness from theological discourse. We can witness this through the way in which simplicity of thought and manner are preferred in Catholic spiritual writings as examples of divine folly, and how this became associated with the concept of the folly of love. Raymond Jordan wrote around 1400 a book called *Contemplationes de amore divino* which circulated under the pseudonym 'Idiota'. At the time *idiota* did not have its present pejorative meaning. In the fourteenth century it was still very close to the Greek meaning: a simple, private person, who did not hold a public office, rather like the peasantry and most women in Jordan's world.[69] As time passed, in the Romance languages the term acquired a stronger meaning, designating someone poor in spirit, the equivalent of the Latin *imbecillis*.[70] This meaning developed into the idea of learned ignorance, or the eschewing of intellectual pride in favour of a meek idiocy.

Nicholas of Cusa (1401–64), an anti-scholastic humanist, relied on this motif of learned ignorance in two of his writings. In *On Learned Ignorance* he argued that the human intellect could never precisely grasp the truth residing in the divine mind due to the incommensurability between human and divine thought.[71] In *De Idiota* (*The Dialogue of the Layman*) he presents us with three main interlocutors—the layman (or unlettered man), the orator (the humanist scholar) and the philosopher (the university-trained dialectician). Contradicting all expectations, the layman proves wiser than his interlocutors. Cusa puts in his mouth a direct reference to Paul's *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, which makes it clear that he intends the idiot to be the representative of learned ignorance: 'the knowledge of this world, wherein thou thinkst thou excellest all other is a certaine foolishnesse before God, and thereupon puffs men up, whereas true knowledge humbles them'.[72] Cusa was writing from within a mystical tradition in which intellectual pride was to be eschewed in favour of contemplation of the Creator. This viewpoint percolated across Western Christendom and survived the Reformation. In the English 1650 edition of Cusa's text, for instance, Everard translates *idiota* directly as 'idiot'. Tim Stainton finds the detail significant because by 1650 the English term was used to denote a person unable to manage his affairs, and was used more generally as a somewhat interchangeable term for 'natural fool'.[73] Meanwhile, in France the Jesuit mystic Jean-Joseph Surin (1600–65) published in 1630 a letter in which he described an encounter with a young man completely unlettered who 'had never been instructed by anyone but God in the spiritual life, and yet he spoke to me about it with such sublimity and solidity that all I have read or

heard is nothing compared to what he told me'.[74] Surin was not atypical in valuing the wisdom of the unlettered over theological instruction.

In Western Christendom, therefore, religious culture tended to read holy folly as a personal spiritual exercise, designed to improve the imitation of Christ's love. This had important critical consequences, since the figure of the holy fool in the West became a mode for self-reflection and spiritual criticism rather than predominantly a political and social critic in the Orthodox sense. The emphasis fell on the folly of love as seen in the writings of the French monk Guillaume de Saint-Thierry (1075–1148), who developed the theme of the folly of the revelation and the need for inner conformity with the suffering humanity of Christ. On Saint-Thierry's scheme the wisdom of philosophy has to be surpassed in order to reach true theology, without which it is void and foolish. In direct connection with this the theme of the folly of love appears: It is foolish love that leads to wisdom.[75] The disciple who wants to attain wisdom has to follow Christ in his passion. This interpretation was reinforced by St Francis of Assisi and the order which followed him: St Francis being well known both as one whose mission was to bring 'new folly' into the world and as the first bearer of stigmata. This 'new folly' was not intended to outrage, however, perhaps with the exception of an early episode in which he stripped himself naked while returning to his father money taken from him for charitable purposes, as ordered by his bishop. Rather, Francis chose the way of simplicity and absolute poverty in order to reach people's hearts and inflame them with God's love. The foolishness of the cross, no longer defined in the context of wisdom, becomes the human response to the foolish love of Christ.[76] Attuned to the same interpretation but with a less inflammatory tone, there followed in the Latin West Thomas à Kempis (1380–1471) with his *Imitation of Christ*, Ignatius of Loyola (1491–1556), and John of the Cross (1542–91). Similar approaches to these medieval interpretations were followed over several centuries. After the Reformation, however, the Pauline tradition made an important comeback through Jansenist theologians such as Blaise Pascal (1623–62), who wrote in his *Pensées* that: 'The grandeur of wisdom that comes from above is invisible to the sensual, and to the merely intellectual'.[77] Notwithstanding this rediscovery of foolish wisdom, the dominant trend in Catholic mysticism has always been inclined in favour of an interpretation emphasising the folly of love,[78] culminating in the twentieth century with St Thérèse of Lisieux (1873–97), who confesses in her autobiography: 'Now I have no desire left, unless it be to love Jesus even unto folly!'.[79]

THE MODERNITY OF THE HOLY FOOL

To understand how the figure of the holy fool was able to make the cultural transition from Christian asceticism to modernity, it is helpful to unpick the various ways in which holy foolishness was refashioned in the

nineteenth century. It was during this period that holy foolishness was lifted out of its hagiographic context and used as a device with which to confront modernity. European philosophers and writers interested in the forces shaping modern society came to pay particular attention to folly and madness as a way of probing contemporary norms. In so doing, they provided powerful cultural models that were to percolate into the cinematic art of the twentieth century. To explain these developments I will focus on three great nineteenth-century thinkers—Søren Kierkegaard (1813–55), Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821–81) and Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900)—from across the European continent, each of whom paid particular attention to these issues. In different ways, their foolish figures would have a profound impact on the cinematic holy fool in the following century.

These three figures have often been heralded as precursors of existentialism and prophets of a new age. Through their writings they dramatised the fate of faith in the nineteenth century, but also reflected on an era in which the established foundations of society were being challenged ever more strongly. In their writings, we can identify three different ways in which the figure of the holy fool was fashioned for a new age: Dostoevsky's idiot, Kierkegaard's knight of faith, and Nietzsche's madman. Even if these thinkers found the boundary between literature and philosophy to be permeable, the figures they devised to represent foolishness are not situated in the same plane. A distinction made by Deleuze and Guattari is useful: 'The difference between conceptual personae and aesthetic figures consists first of all in this: the former are the power of concepts, and the latter are the powers of affects and percepts. The former take effect on a plane of immanence that is an image of Thought-Being (nomenon), and the latter take effect on a plane of composition as image of a Universe (phenomenon)'.[80] According to this distinction, Kierkegaard's knight of faith and Nietzsche's madman are conceptual characters, whereas Dostoevsky's idiot is an aesthetic figure. The idiot is a literary reworking of the Russian Orthodox *iurodivyi* tradition, whereas the knight and the madman are reflections on the European idea of religiously-inspired madness. Each of them, in their own specific way, I will demonstrate, had an impact on how the idea of foolishness was to be constructed as an artistic form in the following century.

KIERKEGAARD'S KNIGHT OF FAITH

The first of the modern reconfigurations of the holy fool I wish to identify originated with the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard. The significance of Kierkegaard for this study is that he reintroduced holy foolishness into modern theological discourse through his revised concept of madness. The 'heavenly sent madness' motif is Socratic but Kierkegaard reinterprets it

from two biblical sources: Genesis 22:1–25—the story of Abraham and Isaac, and the first two chapters of *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*.[81] To understand its cultural impact I will here offer a brief explanation of the Kierkegaardian reconstruction of the fool as a 'knight of faith', as well as some other Kierkegaardian concepts that I will apply in the following chapters.

Kierkegaard appears as the modern thinker whose religious categories were most influenced by *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, and particularly by its opening two chapters. At least three concepts fundamental for Kierkegaard's thinking are derived from St Paul's Epistle: madness, offence and paradox. In trying to explain the position of faith when confronted with a modern, secular worldview, Kierkegaard found these concepts particularly useful. Intriguingly, he believed that the reaction of the modern world to Christ's second coming would be very similar to that picture offered by Paul:

> It is frequently said that if Christ came to the world now he would once again be crucified. This is not entirely true. The world has changed; it is now immersed in 'understanding.' Therefore Christ would be ridiculed, treated as a mad man, but a mad man at whom one laughs. . . . I now understand better and better the original and profound relationship I have with the comic, and this will be useful to me in illuminating Christianity.[82]

In relation to the established order and to human rationality Christ therefore reappears as a fool. For this reason Kierkegaard thinks that Christianity should be primarily defined as madness. Madness represents the very essence of faith. It is in the *First Epistle to the Corinthians* that the notion of offence—Christ being the stumbling block for human understanding—comes into force. Human understanding is offended twice: first at the idea of eternity descending into temporality (the incarnation), and secondly at the idea of a crucified God. This paradoxical statement seems absurd but becomes a condition for faith. In this respect Kierkegaard builds on Tertullian: 'The Son of God has died: this is believable because it is silly; buried he has risen again; this is certain because it is impossible.'[83] The absurd is thus turned into a category, the 'negative category of the divine and of the relation to the divine'.[84] The absurd and the paradox are related categories that Kierkegaard uses interchangeably in relation to Christian faith. However, as in the case of Paul, it is a question of point of view: only from a position outside faith do the main Christian tenets seem absurd, but for the believer this contradiction is overcome.

Kierkegaard borrows the term 'divine madness' from Plato's *Phaedrus* in order to use it in relation to Abraham, his knight of faith from *Fear and Trembling* (1843).[85] The understanding of the term however is Pauline: 'Abraham was greater than everybody—great by that power whose

strength is powerlessness, great by that wisdom whose secret is folly, great by that hope whose form is madness. . .'.[86] The knight of faith is someone who is ready to give up everything and yet, by virtue of the absurd, expects to receive everything back—he/she believes that all things are possible. The context is illuminating for what it reveals about Kierkegaard intentions. Abraham is ordered by God to sacrifice his son, which he is ready to do, but at the same time he has complete faith that his son will be given back to him. To human reason, this sounds absurd but it is the absurdity and madness implied by faith: 'Faith therefore hopes for this life but, be it noted, by virtue of the absurd, not by virtue of human understanding . . . Faith is therefore what the Greeks called the divine madness'.[87] The story can easily fall into the service of divine command theory in ethics but this has the danger of justifying any kind of crime executed on religious grounds or in the name of exceptionality. Instead, a better interpretation would be to consider Kierkegaard's retelling as a parable about 'how all individuals should act: that is, with the seriousness, earnestness, anguish and hope of an Abraham'.[88] The knight of faith is willing to be ridiculed by human society because he is aware of what is at stake, and how radically offensive this is to human rationality. In the modern world, therefore, Kierkegaard offers us a holy fool capable of illuminating the dichotomy between the spiritual and the secular.

DOSTOEVSKY'S IDIOT

If Kierkegaard's understanding of foolishness was derived from his desire to unpick the paradox of private faith in modern society, Dostoevsky, working within an Orthodox cultural tradition, was acutely aware of the holy fool figure as a critic of contemporary social norms. Faced with a rapidly industrializing urban society, Dostoevsky found himself asking whether the holy fool could survive the transition to a more secular and material age. Dosteovesky's exploration of this question was to lead him to create the character of Prince Myshkin in the *Idiot* (1869): a character that Ewa Thompson considered a 'stylized holy fool'. Myshkin is, in other words, a fool who has broken free of the canons of Christian hagiographical writings with their well-established motifs and bears instead an intended resemblance with the famous foolish character of seventeenth-century Spanish literature: Don Quixote (a figure who also captured Kierkegaard's interest). Nonetheless, the character's main function remains that of a critic, laying bare what Dostoevsky saw as the unpleasant truths hidden beneath the wealth and lustre of nineteenth-century St Petersburg society. But, while Myshkin proves to be a challenge for society, society is no less a challenge for him. The questions that Dostoevsky tries to answer are both internal and external: how is the holy fool perceived in a society where traditional modes of thinking no longer

hold sway, and in what way does this modern society affect the holy fool, more precisely the *iurodivyi*?

Dostoevsky's notes are an invaluable source of information for documenting the evolution of his Prince Myshkin. The character underwent a series of refashionings in the process of creation but reached a breakthrough when two related ideas triumphed. In his notes Dostoevsky emphatically scribbled: 'He is a Prince. Idiot. Prince Yurodivi' and 'The idea is—to portray a perfectly beautiful man'.[89] Yet in the novel *iurodivyi* is used only once during the first encounter with Rogozhin. Afterwards the word 'idiot' comes to the fore, used as a pejorative term from the Swiss asylum where Myshkin resided, in spite of the obvious innocence and naivety of the Prince. At the time the word would still have sounded relatively new to the ears of its Slavic users.[90] By highlighting the term Dostovesky draws attention to the way in which modern medical science was interfering with one of the traditional figures of the Russian culture. His intention is to challenge the hegemony of medical science through Myshkin, in whom infinite goodness and mental derangement manage to coexist. However, the novel marks an important moment, showing the way in which it has become difficult for the holy fool to escape the scrutiny of modern science. The slippage of holy fool into the medical terminology of an idiot is a sign that the world has lost its religious perception. However, in the process, mental disturbance is valorised as an insight into the divine. Before the onset of an epileptic fit, the Prince would experience a state described in religious terms by Dostoevsky: 'the acme of harmony and beauty . . . a feeling, unknown and undivined till then, of completeness, of proportion, of reconciliation, and of ecstatic devotional merging in the highest synthesis of life'.[91]

Dostoevsky appeared to be aware, however, that when confronting modernity the holy fool seems to lose his/her redemptive power. The return of Myshkin to the asylum at the end of the novel indicated powerlessness in the face of the spiritual wasteland that Dostoevsky saw emerging. This observation is important because Dostoevsky realized that the holy fool was no longer functioning in its traditional setting, faced with the loss of faith in the contemporary world. The spiritual atmosphere is metaphorically suggested by a copy of Holbein's painting *The Deposition* which appears in chapter 4, part 2, where Prince Myshkin, who has seen it abroad in Basel, remarks: 'Why, that picture might make some people lose their faith'. Commenting on the role of the painting, Jostein Børtnes writes that: 'the dead body in Holbein's painting has become an empty signifier, its very emptiness signifying that the sacrifice of Christ has lost its meaning, thereby depriving the whole of Christian culture of its meaning, too'.[92] In such a context, the holy fool cannot remain unaffected either. If the hagiographic writings tended towards a divinization of the holy fool, the stylized holy fool is markedly humanized. In this way, the fool became more readily divorced from its hagiographical origins.

NIETZSCHE'S MADMAN

Whereas Dostoevsky transformed the fool into a counter-cultural character for a new age, Nietzsche took this development one step further by emphasizing the thoroughly disorientating process that secular modernity has upon the concepts of wisdom and folly. The fool's relationship to secularization is characterized by Nietzsche's madman who heralds the 'death of God' in section 108 of *The Gay Science* (1882): 'I seek God. Whither is God? I will tell you. We have killed him, you and I'. The passage is ambiguous since the madman declared himself to be a God-seeker but at the same time a God-murderer like all his fellow citizens. One line of interpretation holds that the fool presents himself as a God-seeker to indicate that the origins of the death of God and nihilism are rooted in a Christian interpretation of the world that has become redundant. As truth was sought in a transcendent God, so the loss of truth in culture has resulted in the death of God.[93] Nietzsche therefore challenges the fool with the prospect of a world that has lost its meaning, in which his function is to confront society with this reality.

After breaking the 'tremendous' news of the end of God, the fool in Nietzsche's parable ponders the consequences of such an event: 'Whither are we moving? . . . Backwards, sideways, forward, in all directions? Is there still any up and down?'. The 'death of God' removes the old frames of reference such that there are no means of orientation left. However, human society has not yet comprehended this since it has internalised a way of thinking that depends on supernatural presuppositions.[94] For Nietzsche the 'death of God' does not mean a personal confession of atheism but rather a historical and cultural event: the belief in the Christian God has become unbelievable.[95] This is the meaning of the madman's rhetorical question: 'What are these churches, if not the tombs and monuments of God?'. Still, what is implied is a collapse of the system of beliefs and values of traditional European civilization. This is not necessarily a descent into nihilism, and it is possible to argue that Nietzsche's madman heralds the beginning of a new approach to the divine. Heidegger's interpretation of Nietzsche, for example, identifies the 'death of God' not with Christian life, but with the death of the historical institutions of Christianity, the 'secular-political phenomenon of the Church and its claim to power within the formation of Western humanity and its modern culture'.[96] In so doing, Heidegger opens the possibility of a search for a true and living God in Nietzsche's critique of metaphysics.[97] In spite of his opposition to traditional Christian culture, Nietzche's madman can, therefore, be seen to take on some of the dimensions of holy foolishness, providing a vantage point from which to critique the spiritual void of modern society.

In this chapter I have developed an understanding of the holy fool as a multifaceted cultural phenomenon in Europe, with representatives both in the real world and in the world of the imagination. The versatility of the Pauline holy fool has ensured that the figure has been capable of reinterpretion

across historical periods and through surrounding cultures. In the Christian world these developments resulted in a divergence between treatments in the Latin West and Orthodox East, while the development of a more secularized, modern society in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries enabled thinkers to rediscover the critical versatility of the holy fool. The catalogue of figures described above is testament to the way in which its treatment has varied widely: they have ranged from hagiographical figures, to literary characters and conceptual personae. For this reason, the semantic field of the holy fool had, by the twentieth century, extended almost beyond the possibility of a clear-cut definition, rooted instead in prototypes provided by thinkers including Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky. Nonetheless, I have argued that the practice of holy foolishness has remained in many ways faithful to St Paul's *Epistle* both in letter and spirit. As a consequence, regardless of the contexts in which they appear, holy fools more often than not bear a countercultural connotation, laying bare the radical contradiction between the values of the present world and the transcendental values for which they stand. This countercultural critical function survived the transition to modernity, providing, as we shall now encounter, a reassuring and profoundly useful device in modern European cinema.

NOTES

1. In spite of the negative connotations that foolishness bears in the Old Testament, there are known instances when the prophets adopted its appearance in order to drive home different aspects of their preaching: Isaiah walked naked, Zedekiah donned horns of iron, Jeremiah wore a yoke (Isaiah 20:2–4; 1 Kings 22:11, Jer. 27:2) This was nevertheless an occasional practice and not a celebration of folly; it did not lead to a reconsideration of foolishness as did the daring argument of St Paul. However, such instances of unconventional behaviour have been suggested as a possible source of inspiration for the practice of holy foolishness by scholars such as Sergey A. Ivanov and Svitlana Kobets.
2. G Bertram, "Moros, moraino, moria morologia," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*: *Abridged in One Volume*, ed. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Exeter: Paternoster, 1985), 620; Jürgen Goetzmann, Colin Brown and H. Weigel, "Wisdom, Folly, Philosophy," in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, vol. 3, ed. Colin Brown (Carlisle: Paternoster Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1986), 1025.
3. 'Foolishness of God' is the translation of *to moron tou Theou* where the definite article with the neuter single of the adjective *moros* means 'the foolish thing', which indicates that rather than denoting an attribute of God it points to 'God's free dealings with the world', cf. Hans Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians: A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1975), 46.
4. St Paul appropriates the persona of the fool again in 2 Corinthians 11. Here he uses the device as part of a rhetorical strategy allowing him to 'boast' of his numerous afflictions and thereby assert his moral superiority over the 'false apostles'.

5. Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids MI: W B Eerdmans; Carlisle: Paternoster, 2000), 17.
6. Martin Hengel, *Crucifixion in the Ancient World and the Folly of the Message of the Cross* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1977), 89.
7. The unity of the epistle has been contested but for the purpose of this chapter I rely on Anthony C. Thiselton and more recently David R. Hall who convincingly argue for the integrity of 1 Corinthians in *The First Epistle to the Corinthians,* and *The Unity of the Corinthian Correspondence* (London: T. & T. Clark International, 2003).
8. Robert S. Dutch, *The Educated Elite in 1 Corinthians: Education and Community Conflict in Graeco-Roman Context* (New York; London: T. & T. Clark International, 2005), 17.
9. Ben Witherington, *Conflict and Community in Corinth: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans; Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1995); Stephen M. Pogoloff, *Logos and Sophia: The Rhetorical Situation of 1 Corinthians* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1992); Bruce W. Winter, *Philo and Paul Among the Sophist* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); C.K. Barrett, *A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (London: A. & C. Black, 1968); Rudolf Bultmann, "*γινώσκω*" in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964); Walter Schmithals, *Gnosticism in Corinth: An Investigation of the Letters to the Corinthians* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1971); Ulrich Wilckens, *Weisheit und Torheit: eine exegetisch-religions-geschichtliche Untersuchung zu 1. Kor. 1 und 2* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1959); Hans Windisch, "Die gottliche Weisheit der Juden und die paulinische Christologie" in neutestamentliche studien: Georg Heinrici zu seinem 70. Geburtstag, ed. A. Deissmann (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1914); Dom Jacques Dupont, *Gnosis: la connaissance religieuse dans les Épîtres de Saint Paul* (Louvain: E. Nauwlaerts, 1960); Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians*; André Feuillet, *Le Christ, sagesse de Dieu, d'après les épîtres pauliniennes* (Paris: J. Gabalda et Cie, 1966); Richard A. Horsley, *1 Corinthians* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1988); Birger A. Pearson, "Philo, Gnosis and the New Testament" in *The New Testament and Gnosis*, ed. A.H.B. Logan and A.J.M. Wedderburn (New York: T. &T. Clark International, 1983); James Davis, *Wisdom and Spirit: An Investigation of 1 Corinthians 1.18–3.20 Against the Background of Jewish Sapiential Traditions in the Greco-Roman Period* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1984).
10. See David W. Odell-Scott, *Paul's Critique of Theocracy: A/Theocracy in Corinthians and Galatians* (London; New York: T. & T. Clark International, 2003); Robert S. Dutch, *The Educated Elite in 1 Corinthians: Education and Community Conflict in Graeco-Roman Context* (New York; London: T. & T. Clark International, 2005).
11. Raymond Pickett, *The Cross in Corinth: The Social Significance of the Death of Jesus* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 71.
12. Cornelia Cyss Crocker, *Reading 1 Corinthians in the Twenty-First Century* (New York; London, England: T. & T. Clark International, 2004), 78.
13. Thiselton, *The First Epistle*, 158.
14. Paul Hertig, "Fool's Gold: Paul's Inverted Approach to Church Hierarchy (1 Corinthians 4), with Emerging Church implications," *Missiology: An International Review* 35 (2007): 297; Also E.A. Judge, *Social Distinctives of the Christians in the First Century: Pivotal Essays*, ed. David Scholer (Peabody MA: Hendrickson, 2008), 163.
15. Ruth Webb, *Demons and Dancers: Performance in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 96.

16. L.L. Welborn, *Paul, the Fool of Christ, A Study of 1 Corinthians 1–4 in the Comic-Philosophic Tradition* (London: T. & T. Clark International, 2005).
17. Ibid., 117–118.
18. Ibid., 119.
19. Ibid., 117.
20. John J. Winkler elaborates on the grotesque perspective in *Auctor and Actor: A Narratological Reading of Apuleius' The Golden Ass* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 286–292.
21. Ibid., 291.
22. Ibid., 228.
23. In addition to *1 Corinthians* Glenn S. Holland identifies some other instances in which St Paul employs a foolish discourse: *Divine Irony* (Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press; London: Associated University Presses, 2000), 119–157.
24. Welborn, *Paul, the Fool*, 228.
25. Ibid., 99; Holland, *Divine Irony*, 120.
26. In *Symeon the Holy Fool: Leontius's Life and the Late Antique City* (Berkeley; London: University of California Press, 1996), 106, Derek Krueger makes an inventory of the common places of the Symeon's *vita* and Diogenes' to conclude that the hagiographer Leontius, Bishop of Neapolis, draws the parallel in order to show that the Christian ascetic surpassed the Cynic.
27. John Meyendorff, "Wisdom-Sophia: Contrasting Approaches to a Complex Theme," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, *Studies on Art and Archeology in Honor of Ernst Kitzinger on His Seventy-Fifth Birthday* 41 (1987): 391.
28. I Cor. 1:21, PG 82, col. 236C cited in Meyendorff, 391–401.
29. Judith L. Kovacs, *1 Corinthians: Interpreted by Early Christian Commentators* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2005), 27.
30. Ibid., 24–25.
31. Saint Chrysostom, "Homilies on the Epistles of Paul to the Corinthians" in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: First Series, Volume XII*, ed. Philip Schaff (New York: Cosimo Classics, 2007), 54.
32. Ibid., 19.
33. André Derville, "Folie de la Croix" in *Dictionnaire de spiritualité ascétique et mystique, doctrine et histoire*, ed. Marcel Villier, F Cavallera and J de Guibert (Paris: G. Beauchesne, 1937), 646.
34. Ibid., 464.
35. Ibid., 464.
36. Kovacs, *1 Corinthians*, 27.
37. Even though the most widespread theory suggested that *salos* was derived from the Syriac *sakla,* more recent scholarship has disagreed so the word remains of uncertain origin. It has become the technical term to designate holy folly in the Byzantine world but Derek Krueger has argued, following Grosdidier de Matons, that initially its use was colloquial (62–66). Palladius used it for the first time in his *Lausiac History* to designate the nun in a monastery in Tabennisi who feigned madness. *Yuridivyi* circulated initially on a par with other terms until it developed the technical use of today. It derives from the Slavonic *urodivyi* or the short term *urod* which originally meant someone who was congenitally defective. In the seventeenth century the term divided into *urod*—defective by nature—and *iurod*, associated specifically with madness (Ivanov, *Holy Fools*, 245)
38. Both Palladius's *Lausiac History* and Leontius's *The Life of Symeon of Emesa* reference 1 Cor 3:18, see Krueger 133.
39. Gilbert Dargon, "L'homme sans honneur ou le saint scandaleux," *Annales. Économies, Sociétés, Civilisations* 4 (1990): 934.
40. Sergey A. Ivanov, *Holy Fools in Byzantium and Beyond* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 48.

41. By the same token the holy fools' afflictions and lives of abjection hark back to Isaiah's portrayal of the Suffering Servant of God (Is. 52:13–53:12), which was interpreted from early Christian times as a messianic text. The holy fools follow in the steps of Christ as a man of sorrows.
42. Michel de Certeau, *La Fable Mystique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1982), 49.
43. Gershon Berkson, "Mental Disabilities in Western Civilization from Ancient Rome to the Prerogativa Regis," *Mental Retardation* 44 (2006): 37.
44. Peter C. Bouteneff, "'What Kind of Fool Am I?', Further Gleanings from Holy Folly" in *Abba: The Tradition of Orthodoxy in the West*, Festschrift for Bishop Kallistos (Ware) of Diokleia, ed. John Behr, Andrew Louth and Dimitri Conomos (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2003), 343.
45. St. Justin Martyr, *The First and Second Apologies*, trans. Leslie William Barnard (New York: Paulist Press, 1997), Apology 1, 13, 31.
46. Ivanov notes that the element of aggression that was added to the apostolic 'foolishness' (*moria*) necessitated the use of a different technical term—*salia*, 31.
47. John Saward, *Perfect Fools: Folly for Christ's Sake in Catholic and Orthodox Spirituality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 18.
48. "A Translation of *The Life of Symeon the Holy Fool* by Leontius of Neapolis" in Krueger, *Symeon the Holy Fool*, 131–172.
49. Bouteneff, "What Kind of Fool," 339.
50. Paul Magdalino, referring to the opinions of the Bollandists and Peter Brown, "What We Heard in the Lives of the Saints We Have Seen with Our Own Eyes" in *The Cult of Saints in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages*, ed. James Howard-Johnston and Paul Antony Hayward (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 86.
51. Lennart Ryden, "The Holy Fool" in *The Byzantine Saint: 14th Spring symposium: Papers*, ed. Sergei Hackel (University of Birmingham: Fellowship of St Alban and St Sergius, 1981), 113.
52. Ibid., 21.
53. Bouteneff, "What Kind of Fool," 341.
54. Fedotov, *The Russian Religious Mind*, vol. 2, *The Middle Age: The Thirteenth to the Fifteenth Centuries* (Cambridge, MA Harvard University Press, 1966), 342.
55. Ivanov, *Holy Fools*, 403.
56. Ibid., 302.
57. Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, *The Works of Dionysius the Areopagite*, I, *Divine Names, Mystic Theology, Letters &c.*, trans. by Rev. John Parker (London: James Parker, 1897), 87.
58. Among others, Kallistos Ware, *The Inner Kingdom* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2000), 154.
59. Fedotov, *The Russian*, 321.
60. Ivanov, *Holy Fools*, 298.
61. Saward, *Perfect Fools*, 27.
62. Irina Gorainoff, *Les fols en Christ dans la tradition orthodoxe* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1983), 27.
63. Ware, *The Inner Kingdom*. 169.
64. Ibid., 161.
65. Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, *The Letters of St Bernard of Clairvaux* (London: Burns Oates, 1953) in Saward, *Perfect Fools*, 58
66. Saward, *Perfect Fools*, 12.
67. Neither 'idiot' nor 'madman' is taken here in the clinical sense.
68. Saward, *Perfect Fools*, 68.
69. Patrick McDonagh, *Idiocy: A Cultural History* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2008), 6.
70. Jean Leclercq, "'L'Idiot' à la lumière de la tradition chrétienne," *Revue d'histoire de la spiritualité: revue d'ascetique et de mystique* 49 (1973): 289–304.

71. Christopher M. Bellitto, Thomas M. Izbicki and Gerald Christianson, *Introducing Nicholas of Cuss: A Guide to a Renaissance Man* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2004), 179.
72. Nicholas of Cusa, *The Idiot: in four books. The first and second of wisdome. The third of the minde. The fourth of statick experiments, or experiments of the ballance* (London: Printed for VVilliam Leake, 1650), 1.
73. Tim Stainton, "Reason's Other: The Emergence of the Disabled Subject in the Northern Renaissance," *Disability & Society* 19 (2004): 225–243.
74. de Certeau, *La fable*, 207.
75. Guillaume de Saint-Thierry, *Deux traités de l'amour de Dieu: De la contemplation de Dieu. De la nature et de la dignité de l'amour*, trans. M.-M. Davy (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1953), 78–79.
76. Derville, "Folie," 648.
77. Blaise Pascal, *Thoughts on Religion and Philosophy*, trans. Isaac Taylor (Glasgow: William Collins, 1838), 182.
78. *The Song of Songs*, through its allegorical interpretation as the passionate loving relationship between Christ and the soul, is often taken as the scriptural source for mad love in Christian affective mysticism.
79. Saint Therese of Lisieux, *The Story of a Soul*, trans. Thomas N. Taylor (New York: Cosimo, 2007), 116
80. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?* (London: Verso, 1994), 65.
81. Merold Westphal, *Kierkegaard's Critique of Reason and Society* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1987), 87.
82. Søren Kierkegaard, *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Bloomington, IN; London: Indiana University Press, 1978), X' A 187.
83. Q. Septimii Florentis Tertulliani, **De carne Christi** *liber: Tertullian's Treatise on the incarnation*, ed. and trans. Ernest Evans (London: S.P.C.K., 1956), 19.
84. Kierkegaard, *Journals*, X6 B 79.
85. Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, ed. by C. Stephen Evans, Sylvia Walsh, trans. by Sylvia Walsh (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 20.
86. Kierkegaard, *Fear*, 14.
87. Kierkegaard, *Journals*, 1:5, cited in Westphal, *Kierkegaard's Critique*, 100.
88. George Pattison, *The Philosophy of Kierkegaard* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005), 111.
89. Joseph Frank, *Between Religion and Rationality: Essays in Russian Literature and Culture* (Princeton, NJ; Woodstock: Princeton University Press, 2000), 31.
90. Wendy Lesser, *Nothing Remains the Same: Rereading and Remembering* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2003), 106.
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92. Jostein Børtnes, "Doestoevsky's *Idiot* or the Poetics of Emptiness," *Scando-Slavica* 40 (1994): 14.
93. Brian D. Ingraffia, *Postmodern Theory and Biblical Theology: Vanquishing God's Shadow* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 29.
94. Aaron Ridley, *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Nietzsche on Art* (London: Routledge, 2007), 64.
95. Christopher Cox, *Nietzsche: Naturalism and Interpretation* (Berkeley, CA; London: University of California Press, 1999), 16–17.
96. Martin Heidegger, *Off the Beaten Track*, ed. and trans. by Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 164.
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2 Speaking Truth to Power
The Holy Fool in Soviet and Russian Cinema

> Shall I not go on my knees before you in the mud,
> Blessing the trace of thy bare foot,
> You homeless, wretched, drunken
> Russia—you fool in Christ.
>
> Maximilian Voloshin, *Holy Russia* (1917)

In the Soviet director Eisenstein's film *Ivan the Terrible* the image of a strange, bearded, long-haired man carrying thick chains across his naked body and admonishing an anointed ruler with harsh words would make for a striking appearance of folly in any historical film. To a Russian audience, however, it is less clear that such iconography would be considered extraordinary. In Russian culture the holy fool inhabits a paradoxical situation: While traditionally defined by marginality, the *iurodivyi*—the Russian holy fool—has also entered the discourse of mainstream culture, following a move from the realm of the Church into the secular arts and cultural theory. The premodern figure of the holy fool has been rediscovered in modern Russia as a versatile tool, not only to pinpoint the nation's historical idiosyncrasies, but also as a means to help define its contemporary culture.[1] I am beginning my comparative study of holy foolishness in European cinema with Soviet and post-Soviet Russia, because it is here that the concept is most clearly rooted and defined within the boundaries of a national religious tradition.

This tradition has endowed the holy fool with powerful critical functions. In the analysis that follows I will suggest that the appearance of the holy fool in Soviet and Russian cinema is part of a subversive visual discourse that repositions the holy fool as a powerful critic of the existing order. In order to explain this development I will begin by considering the aesthetic and ethical aspects of holy foolishness in the Russian Orthodox tradition, and their relation to the critical function of the holy fool. I will then turn to the political function of the holy fool as expressed in the 'Russian Idea': an historical, socio-political and religious canvas on which the critical practice of holy foolishness can be understood. Russian culture presents us with an unusually complex situation, since holy foolishness designates not only a

theological category but also a popular cultural phenomenon. Since the figure of the holy fool is translated outside the strictly religious sphere, cultural re-interpretations result in stylized versions of the holy fool. For this reason the chapter will split discussion of the figure in Soviet/Russian cinema into two sections. First, I will examine portrayals of holy fools that were directly inspired by hagiographic models. These figures emerge in the films of the Soviet directors Sergei Eisenstein, Sergei Bondarchuk, Elem Klimov, and also more recently in the work of the Russian director Pavel Lungin. The second section will examine stylized portrayals of the holy fool figure, as prominent in the Soviet and post-Soviet films of the directors Pyotr Todorovsky, Tengiz Abuladze, Alexander Kaidanovsky, Andrei Konchalovsky, Konstantin Lopushansky, Karen Shakhnazarov and Aleksandr Gornovsky. One notable absentee here is the director Andrei Tarkovsky, who will be considered separately in the next chapter on account of the pioneering and sophisticated way in which the idea appears in his work. I argue that, in spite of the many different forms that stylized holy fools take when compared to their hagiographical-inspired counterparts, the figure still retains, implicitly or explicitly, the same subversive critical function.

THE AESTHETIC AND ETHICAL FUNCTIONS OF HOLY FOOLISHNESS IN RUSSIAN ORTHODOXY

Before we move to examine holy foolishness in Russian film, it is worth considering some aesthetic aspects which surface in the cinematic portrayal of holy fools. This is necessary because various aesthetic features of holy foolishness appear in Russian culture to a degree unmatched elsewhere. These features were derived from the canonical representations of holy fools in Byzantium and for this reason are applicable to all those holy fools inspired by a hagiographical tradition. These considerations will help explain how the simple presence of a holy fool can be such a powerful critical device, holding a mirror to contemporary assumptions and forcing reconsideration of existing political and social structures.

In different settings we find distinct aspects of holy foolishness accentuated. Sergei Ivanov observes that: 'The culture which gives birth and semantic form to the concept of holy foolery notes and endows with meaning only these features of insane behaviour which are conceptually relevant to it, while ignoring the rest'.[2] In Russian culture two prominent features of the holy fool model are public humiliation and degradation, which can take the form of the ugly, the repulsive and the grotesque. Often holy fools walk around in rags or almost naked while their deeds can be annoying or even terrifying, and their words simple gibberish. Through his/her behaviour and appearance the holy fool contravenes conventional forms of decency in order to express sheer abjection. This has aesthetical as well as ethical implications, by confounding the distinctions between beauty and ugliness,

cleanness and uncleanness, and purity and impurity.[3] In what follows I will uncover the significance embedded in their *modus vivendi*.

After the Second World War, the philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin developed a powerful theory of the grotesque which was to influence cultural studies inside and outside Russia. In his writings the fool appears as a literary figure, in which he includes the Orthodox *iurodivyi*, and the figure is connected to the more general categories of the carnavalesque and the grotesque. In his *Rabelais and His World* (1965) Bakhtin argues that in conjunction with religious festivals representing official 'high' culture, and in opposition to their seriousness and loftiness, joyful and popular celebrations also took place such as the Feast of Fools, the Feast of the Ass, and the Carnival. Fools were a familiar figure in these celebrations, having a role to enact a reversal of the existing social hierarchy.[4] As a consequence of this symbolic reversal, not only are the lowest strata of society elevated, but also everything that has to do with the lower parts of the body and its biological functions. Grotesque realism is the expression of 'man's vivid awareness of his materiality, [and] of his bodily nature, closely related to the life of the earth'.[5] What carnivalization achieves is a 'joyful relativity' in contrast with the dogmatism of an official culture seeking to preserve a given social order.[6] Bakhtin's theory of the grotesque captures the spirit of the medieval ceremonial fools, but its valorization of the corporeal does not offer a definitive explanation of the Russian *iurodstvo*.

Building on Bakhtin's theoretical premises, A.M. Panchenko sees the phenomenon of *iurodstvo* as occupying an intermediate position between the popular culture of laughter and official church culture. It gives rise to a world turned upside-down; a counter-world which subverts the logic of the dominant culture.[7] Here not only do we find questioning of that which the world holds as virtue, but also an undermining of aesthetic values. For this reason, Panchenko argues, *iurodstvo* is also a rejection of the ideal of the beautiful and an elevation of the ugly to an aesthetical principle, with aesthetical elements being absorbed into the ethical.[8] He identifies two precursors: the Cynical school of philosophy and a strand in Christianity itself which he traces back to the customary connection established between carnal beauty and the devil, and also to the tradition represented by Justin, Origen, Clemens of Alexandria and Tertullian, which reflected on the ugliness of Christ: a trait that in the Old Testament was regarded as messianic.[9]

Iurodstvo, as an *imitatio Christi* practice, is indeed a continuation of this old theological tradition. In this respect its sources are both biblical and patristic. The passage from Isaiah referring to the 'suffering servant' or the 'man of sorrows' has been interpreted in Orthodox Christian literature as a reference to the Messiah, and more specifically to the moment of His passion: 'he had no form or comeliness that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief' (Isaiah 53: 2–3). The chapters from Paul's *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, which are credited

in hagiographical texts as the origin of the practice of holy foolishness, indirectly reinforce this Old Testament imagery in a way that 'revolutionizes ancient perception and philosophy'.[10] By directing his rhetorical skills against tendencies in the Corinthian community, the apostle Paul returned his attention to the weak, the foolish and the low in society. In his preaching the whole hierarchy of ancient values has been turned upside down by the cross, for which reason the Greeks consider it foolishness. After the fourth century the emphasis started to fall more on the cross as a symbol of Christ's triumph rather than of His torture, especially as a result of the Emperor Constantine's victory over his enemies under this sign. Early church writers such as Clemens of Alexandria, Origen, Irenaeus and Tertullian write about the 'ugly' appearance of Christ on the basis of Isaiah 53 and also justify it as an effective mode of preaching, which does not distract attention from Christ's words.[11]

The iconoclastic drive of the Byzantine and Russian holy fools can, therefore, be interpreted as following in the steps of this 'cult of the ugly' present in the early Church which stood in stark contrast to Greek ideals of classical beauty. The art of representing the canonical holy fool in grotesque naturalism is called 'paradoxical' by Jostein Børtnes, since it is 'grounded in the principle of contrast, reducing the points of similarity between the "earthy" and the "upperworldly", the visible and the invisible, to a minimum'.[12] For this reason the holy fool, more than any other kind of saint, is an incognito servant of God.[13] This 'inverted symbolism' whereby the most base and despised things designate the most elevated reality has an ethical dimension. When in a hagiographic, literary or cinematic work the debasement of the holy fool appears in a context, it develops a critical function, involuntary or not. The holy fool does not have to pass explicit judgment because the visual force of the representation can itself challenge contemporary norms.

Given these aesthetical and ethical characteristics of traditional holy foolishness, how are they given value in subsequent literary and cinematic works? A useful concept is *ostranenie*—defamiliarization—proposed by Viktor Shklovsky (1893–1984), a key figure of the Russian Formalist School. *Ostranenie* is the means whereby something is made strange so that habitual perceptions are imbued with a refreshed vision.[14] Firstly, it can be applied to art in general, as a way to distinguish it from ordinary experience; and secondly it is an artistic device that creates unusual perspectives. The fool brings with him/her a worldview that is deviant from the ethos of civil society, and as a result it is perceived as foolish or scandalous. By throwing in this provocation, *iurodstvo* achieves the defamiliarization necessary to look at society's values anew.[15] While defamiliarization is conceived as an artistic device within the practice of the formalist school, in the case of holy foolishness the defamiliarization achieved by scandal expands into the realm of the ethical, social and political. As Antoci observes: 'Scandal gives these marginal deeds the valence necessary to engage mainstream persons

and institutions'.[16] The fool, by eschewing the assumptions of the dominant culture, becomes a stranger to that culture and, from the position of the outsider, confronts society about its own clichés.[17] The function of the fool in connection with society has similarities with the function of the parable as interpreted by the New Testament scholar J.D. Crossan. While the role of the myth is to establish worldviews, he argues that the function of the parable is to 'create contradiction within a given situation of complacent security . . . [in order] to challenge the fundamental principle of security'.[18] We could indeed say that there is a great deal of parabolic intention that gives the fools their critical edge. Having explored the aesthetic and ethical functions of the holy fools, I will now turn to the political power with which they have been invested, best captured in the context of the politico-religious narrative known under the name of the 'Russian Idea'.

THE POLITICAL FUNCTION OF THE HOLY FOOL WITHIN THE 'RUSSIAN IDEA'

In 1996, as part of the commemoration of a Century of Cinema, the British Film Institute released the documentary *The Russian Idea*, directed by Sergey Selyanov and scripted by Oleg Kovalov. Here the 'Russian Idea', understood as the mission to bring about the Kingdom of God on earth, is paradoxically shown to be the shaping force behind post-revolutionary cinema. According to the documentary, this tradition was shaped in the 1920s by avant-garde directors including Eisenstein, Pudovkin and Dovzhenko, and reached a climax with the final scene of Tarkovsky's *Stalker*. The argument is reliant on Nikolai Berdyaev's version of the 'Russian Idea' as a national messianic mission characterized by opposing elements and suspended between two opposed kingdoms: the here and now versus the eternal everlasting. This essentially religious idea is used to interpret the very reality that denied it: on this scheme, communism becomes the manifestation of religious utopia, the dream of heaven on earth. The way to achieve this is through the self-sacrifice of the hero for the sake of a radiant future. Individual salvation is impossible, and the hero accepts his sacrifice for the salvation of all. Ultimately, Selyanov and Kovalov claim, the 'Russian Idea' also refers to the unresolved opposition between the state, with the Tsar as its representative, and the 'Kingdom', represented by the holy fool. The documentary is by no means extensive but conveys a number of important elements that make up the historically layered meanings of the 'Russian Idea'.

Essentially a religious narrative, the 'Russian Idea' mobilizes both social and political elements. Its pivotal significance for understanding Russian identity and culture resides in the explanation it offers of the messianic mission of the Russian people, which accounts for both its particularism and universalism. From this messianic understanding of the historical role of the

Russian nation and the terms on which it has been fashioned stem a series of ideas relevant to the context of our discussion. These shape debates in the public arena to such an extent that artistic artifacts such as films are categorized according to criteria that take into account the engagement with these ideas. For example, George Faraday proposes four opposing positions available to the Russian directors: messianic elitism, amoral elitism, messianic populism and amoral populism, which are formed at the intersection of two axes: the ideological message and the targeted public.[19]

The 'Russian Idea' is intimately linked to national identity because its three institutional pillars are the Orthodox Church, the Tsarist state and the peasant commune, which taken together are often regarded as constitutive of Russian identity. I will not attempt here a review of the many shapes that the idea has taken in the socio-political theories of different thinkers, but will rather pinpoint the dynamic between the forces at play and how this accounts for the genesis and evolution of the practice of holy foolishness. Coined by Dostoevsky at about 1860, the 'Russian Idea' was first discussed in a systematic way by the religious philosopher Vladimir Solovyev in a talk given in Paris in 1889 and published in French and Russian in 1889 and 1909, respectively.[20] In his moral philosophy the 'Russian Idea' acquired universalistic tones: Russia being seen in the service of all other nations. The idea only reached theoretical acuity in the work of another philosopher, Nicolai Berdyaev, especially in his *The Russian Idea* (1946). In this text Berdyaev gave an historical overview of a religious conception with social and political ramifications that harked back to the fifteenth century but which rose into national consciousness through the nineteenth-century debates between the Slavophiles and the Westernizers, when it was conceived in opposition to what was seen as Western European individualism and rationalism.

Crucial for the inception of the idea was an historical event which caused the Russian kingdom to become focused on the messianic idea of Moscow as the Third Rome.[21] After the fall of the Byzantine Empire to the Turks in 1453, the Russian people began to see themselves as the last bulwark and their mission to preserve and perpetuate the Orthodox faith. The rationale for the idea owes much to a monk from Pskov, Philoteus, who, in a letter to Basil III in 1511, argued that the Russian church had been invested with a divine mission as the protector of Orthodoxy, which demanded of its rulers special moral responsibilities for preserving the purity of faith. Two forces were envisioned as Christ-bearers: the people (the Church) and the ruler, which were to work together in a harmonious relationship for the realization of this divine mission.

As the monk proposed, the religious idea of the Third Rome was inextricably dependent on the political establishment for its realization. But soon this ideal form of government was to degenerate into autocracy under the reign of Ivan the Terrible (1530–84). Berdyaev notes the inherent tension that lay beneath attempts to put the ideal vision into practice:

> The doctrine of Moscow as the Third Rome became the basic idea on which the Muscovite state was formed. The kingdom was consolidated and shaped under the symbol of a messianic idea. The search for true, ideal kingship was characteristic of the Russian people throughout history. . . . . But the religious idea of the kingdom took shape in the powerful state in which the Church was to play a subservient part. The Moscow Orthodox kingdom was a totalitarian state.[22]

The notorious theoretician of Russian autocracy was Ivan the Terrible. Interestingly, in opposition to his political vision, a new concept arose: that of 'Holy Russia'. Michael Cherniavsky interprets it as an 'antitsarist, antistate slogan', expressing a popular ideology that existed outside the political establishment.[23] The stage was set for future confrontations, often stemming from an attempt to rescue individual liberty and equality at the expense of centralised power, be it political or ecclesiastical. The framework was religious, supported through a messianic vision of national destiny. This has frequently generated apocalyptic feelings and interpretations whenever an obstacle appeared to block the ideal, so that messianism and apocalypticism in this context are closely related.[24] This is important to observe because it helps us understand the apocalyptic atmosphere that dominated Lopushansky's and Tarkovsky's films and informed the latter's mindset during his twilight years.

How does the holy fool tie relate to these concepts? Nancy Condee makes the suggestion that the figure of the holy fool is a means to give expression to the paradoxes and contradictions embedded in the 'Russian Idea'.[25] I would go further. The holy fool figure's principle of construction, paradoxically uniting the sublime with the abject, makes it an excellent vehicle to voice the tension created between institutionalized power and the ideal of a commune. On a symbolic level it becomes an ideal to represent tensions on two levels: between the kenotic, humiliated Christ and the glorified Christ, and also between the historical and the eschatological realities. The fool's life is a celebration of the virtue of humility: the very virtue that forms the foundation of the Russian spirituality.[26]

The holy fool's logic of construction (if textualized), or action (if practiced in reality), is based on inversion, since destitution and suffering in this world are taken to be indicative of high status in the next. This often takes the form of a political function. If the hagiographies do not ascribe directly a political function to the holy fool, it is clear that it is implied in the numerous episodes in which the holy fool is pitted against the secular power.[27] John Saward notices that the holy fools are most common at a time of political tranquility, when the Church is absorbed by the political status quo.[28] When applied to the Russian context such 'tranquility' is not to be understood as an induced state of spiritual torpor. As G.P. Fedotov explains, the sixteenth century was a peculiarly fruitful time for holy foolishness due to these special historical circumstances. The forms of autocratic Tsardom and the subservient role of the church were widely believed to be in need of

correction. Similar to the Old Testament prophets on whose archetype the figure was fashioned, the holy fool took a stand against the rulers' abuse of power and their betrayal of what was seen as the Christian mission.[29]

In a peculiar way, the holy fool came to threaten the tendencies towards absolutism manifested by the state or the Church not so much through his/her words but principally by the values he/she stood for; in this case, the values embraced by 'Holy Russia'. An ideal social model like 'Holy Russia' is complemented by a spiritual one: a community conceived as 'opposed to law, abstract associations, formal organization, and mutual interest' is instead supported by a vision in which the human being is governed not through external prescriptions but by the voice of the conscience—the voice of God.[30] This vision undermines any worldly authority whether regulated by laws or autocratic since it raises to the status of ultimate authority the voice of God embodied in the community that people form.[31] Furthermore, the holy fool's extreme humility as a form of asceticism and his/her subsequent humiliation as a form of sharing in the passions of Christ, as well as his/her non-resistance to evil and lack of any socio-political ambitions, stand in stark contrast to the state's political ideology and also to the Church's practices when she embraces worldly mentalities and structures. As John Saward remarks, the holy fool's political power is 'dependent upon his being an unstable and strange element' in a closely knit society.[32]

There remains one further important reason why the holy fool integrates so well into the Russian Idea narrative and which also illuminates the religious grounds that underpin the political singularity of Russia in the history of European civilization. What relinquishing one's mind suggests intuitively in terms of the holy fool's attitude towards reason is spelled out by one of the theorists of the Russian Idea, the founder of the Slavophilic movement Ivan Kireevsky (1806–56). In his view the spiritual divide between East and West is a result of the latter's rationalist spirit and individualism. On this argument European culture has lost its inner wholeness and become fragmented as a result of a deviation into abstract rationalism.[33] This is reflected, Kireevsky argues, not only in religion but in the whole Western civilization. We could, therefore, say that from a Slavophile perspective the holy fool figure is a bastion against this rationalism, as a champion of the logic of the heart over the logic of reason. This intermingling between the religious and the political accounts for the holy fool's participation in a debate that is both spiritual and political. Having shown the many-faceted significance of holy fools in Russia, we can now turn to their representation in the cinematic tradition of Soviet and post-Soviet Russia.

CINEMATIC REPRESENTATIONS OF THE HAGIOGRAPHIC HOLY FOOL

Peter C. Bouteneff usefully proposed that the figure of the hagiographic holy fool could be broken into three types: the scandalous prankster, the 'terrifying ascetic' and the blessed idiot.[34] In cinema, I would argue, this has

branched in two directions: an exploration of the potentialities of the blessed idiot figure and of the holy madman figure, into which the other two categories are collapsed. The blessed idiot figure would mostly be referred to in Russian by the word *blazhenny* (blessed, innocent) and his/her foolishness would manifest itself as 'an intellectual and physical simplicity and lowliness'.[35] While the holy madman's behaviour is overtly and often aggressively challenging, the blessed idiot is gentle and lacks the vocality of the former.

One of the earliest depictions of the iconography of the holy fool in Russian film was made by a seminal founding figure in Soviet cinema: Sergei Eisenstein. This might at first appear surprising given that his artistic talents were often in the service of Marxist ideology. Even more surprising perhaps, might be that this holy fool should emerge in a film in which Josef Stalin took a keen interest. Sergei Eisenstein's *Ivan the Terrible* (1944) was commissioned by the Soviet leader as part of a campaign designed to legitimize, by means of recourse to an idealized past, both the centralization of power in his own hands and the terror that he had spread to subdue his own people.[36] The ruthless actions of the sixteenth-century despot, a figure reclaimed as a heroic predecessor to Stalin, were to be justified through the pursuit of a higher national purpose. Whether Eisenstein endeavoured to fulfill Stalin's vision remains highly questionable, for the Soviet authorities had serious reservations regarding the second part of his film (released as a result as late as 1958), and obstructed the realization of a third part. It is not difficult to notice that the narrative line of the film, while in keeping with Stalin's historical version, seems to be constantly undermined by the visual discourse, granting the film a sense of ambiguity.

Before exploring further the appearances of the hagiographic holy fool in Russian cinema, I want to dwell a little further on the significance of what is possibly the figure's first appearance upon the Soviet stage in Eisenstein's film. Eisenstein is well known for his ambivalent relationship with religion.[37] While there is evidence that he was drawn towards mysticism, his attitude was nevertheless anti-clerical and his films often reflect a negative image of the Orthodox Church.[38] In spite of this, however, and especially in *Ivan the Terrible,* we can see an emphasis on ecclesiastical ceremonies and insignia. In Ivan's portrayal religious imagery is often employed as a subtle commentary, subversive of any *prima facie* meaning. On this reading, the appearance of a holy fool becomes less of a surprise in Eisenstein's recreation of the past. Even if it is difficult to establish the historical authenticity of the holy fool that challenged Tsar Ivan IV (1547–84),[39] it is easy to notice the critical role that the holy fools play in relation to official power, and indeed this is the function from which Eisenstein drew. The cultural historian Sergey Ivanov identifies this as one of the elements that enriched the holy fool paradigm when it was translated to medieval Russia from the Byzantine Empire: 'Wherever he may be, the holy fool exposes the artifices of the worldly structures which serve as guarantors of the divine order. In Byzantium this means, primarily, the Church; in Rus the Tsar'.[40] Pitted against a centralised authority represented by the Tsar, the fool establishes himself

Figure 2.1 The image of the warrior saint in the background emphasizes the mission of Eisenstein's holy fool. (*Ivan the Terrible*)

as his spiritual double and as an alternative pole of power and authority. Priscilla Hunt gives us an insight in how the transgressive spirituality of the holy fool functioned as a language expressing the tension between the official hierarchical structures of power and the egalitarian aspirations of the community, which the holy fool attempts to bring into balance.[41] During the totalitarian Soviet period of Russian history in the twentieth century, holy foolishness therefore offered a subtle but recognisable language of dissent.[42]

Given the privileged relationship with power that the holy fool holds in Russian culture, it is not difficult to see Eisenstein's intentions in employing the holy fool. In a situation where everybody is submitting to Ivan's will, the holy fool is his only subject who sees through his manipulation and dares to reprehend it. Eisenstein manipulates the symbolism of the holy fool's paraphernalia, traditionally interpreted as either ascetic practice or having a prophetic significance. In his enraged remonstrance, Eisenstein's holy fool casts malevolent looks, and makes accusations of witchcraft and cold-blooded murder, all the while pulling the chains worn across his naked body in a gesture evoking a proletarian protest as much as a divine mission. It is clear that his revolt cannot be appeased as straightforwardly as if it were the mutiny of a mob. If intended to be read as the embodiment or the survival of a revolutionary spirit, the holy fool levels a particularly powerful critique of Stalin's autocratic tendencies. Whilst drawing on established hagiographic iconography and the traditional understanding of the holy fool as a spiritual

pole of power in opposition to the secular power, Eisenstein manipulates these features to serve his own artistic and political ends. In order to do so he also diverges from the historical chronicles, according to which Ivan held holy fools in high regard and even feared them.

Although it is likely that Eisenstein intended to launch a political critique through his use of the holy fool, any higher spiritual significance is drained out of the figure. Such an appropriation leaves us with both an observation and a question that will prove of consequence in the development of my argument. The observation is that the figure of the holy fool is capable of retaining power over the popular imagination, even in a supposedly materialist Soviet climate. This is in keeping with a more general trend in Russian criticism which sees holy foolishness not only as a religious phenomenon but also as a tool of cultural interpretation. We are left, therefore, with a question about how well the 'canonical' iconography of the holy fool serves the critical function of holy foolishness in cinema. The responses to this question will be linked to an inquiry into how holy foolishness has been culturally reworked, and I will return to both these issues at various points during this chapter.

Eisenstein was far from being the only Russian or Soviet director to use the hagiographic tradition to portray on film the holy fool figure. In the same mode stands Sergei Bondarchuk's rendition of the relationship between another holy fool, possibly nicknamed "Big Cap", and Boris Godunov (1598–1605), who was crowned Tsar within a few years of the death of Ivan the Terrible. Bondarchuk's 1986 film *Boris Godunov* is a grand adaptation of Pushkin's eponymous play. On this reading Boris had not only usurped the legitimate claimant, contriving the death of Ivan's son, but was also responsible for a wave of persecutions triggered by the apparition of a pretender: a monk assuming the identity of the murdered Tsarevich. Bondarchuk, following folk and literary traditions, has the guilt-ridden Tsar confronted by a holy fool Nikolka. He wanders the streets in winter dressed in rags, barefoot, wearing a broken metal helmet on his head and a big cross hanging in a thick chain around his neck. He acts as Godunov's conscience, reminding the Tsar that his request to kill the children who have mocked him and stolen his kopek is very similar to what he himself did to the Tsarevich. The *iurodivyi* not only utters this inconvenient truth to the surprise of the crowds, but also refuses to grant Godunov's request by replying that he will not pray for 'Tsar Herod', which functions as an ominous sign.

A holy fool conceived in the same mould, but this time as a fictional figure rather than a historical one, appears in Elem Klimov's *Agony* (1975). Here we remain in the same iconographic canon but with the difference that historical references are less certain, even if the two protagonists of the film are two important historical figures: Rasputin and Tsar Nicholas II. This film was controversial and only released ten years after production. Against a range of films developing a Russian nationalistic tendency during the 1970s and early 1980s, *Agony* struck a discordant note because of the

balanced, almost positive, treatment of a Tsar struggling against his weak nature to rule the country and counter the negative influence of Rasputin at the imperial court. The holy fool makes a brief appearance. His character is again constructed in opposition to a malefic center of power: a neat and tidy Rasputin, but one all too ready to indulge in debaucheries, is briefly juxtaposed with a filthy, hunchbacked holy fool, wearing heavy metal religious artifacts. The latter's transgressive spirituality is used as a critical device against transgressive immorality. The use of the holy fool here reinforces the enduring power that the iconography of the holy fool held through the Soviet era, yet the scene is given an ambiguity such that the fool's critical function is not wholly positive.

THE ISLAND (2006)

It is not at all surprising that the post-Soviet era has witnessed a return to the cultural model of the holy fool in all its spiritual significance. The rediscovery of pre-Soviet national identities after 1991 has included a strong appreciation of the Christian Orthodox aspects of that heritage, of which the holy fool represents an idiosyncratic expression. As a result the religious and hagiographic component of holy foolishness has recently started to be fully exploited by Russian directors. Such films include Pavel Lungin's *Ostrov/The Island* which is generally considered to be the first feature film to elaborate on the spiritual model of the hagiographic holy fool to such an extent that it becomes the central concern of the film. Lungin's film was conceived as a response to a new chapter in post-Soviet Russia's ongoing search for identity. At the opening of an interview with the director Lungin, the film critic Andrey Plakhov comments on the symbolic value that the film has for today's Russia: 'Nowadays, more than likely it is considered more important to resolve inner problems—symbolically within the individual, as within the country'.[43] Adopting a traditionalist stance, the whole film is intended as an alternative to the cultural and political discourses that overlook religious hagiography in favour of secular references. The director's acknowledged ambition is to 'open up new genres in film, in this case the genre of the lives of the saints'.[44] The narrative form of *Ostrov* is similar to the pictorial representations of the *vitae* of the saints called *klejma*—a series of images framing the icon and depicting episodes from the life of a saint.[45] Partially independent episodes are welded together to create the multifarious image of the clairvoyant, penitent, prankster, pedagogue and exorcist Father Anatoly. While reinforcing the values held by the Russian Orthodox Church in the continuous debates over national identity, does this fool preserve the characteristics of untamed dissent in relation to authority?

Although the story is set in Soviet times—the 1970s—for most of its length, Lungin utilizes the national emblem of the holy fool in such a fashion that he projects the image of a new spiritual guide for the post-Soviet

era. Father Anatoly, the stoker of a monastery situated on an island, is paradoxically both a prankster and a clairvoyant, only loosely resembling the saints that the script writer Dmitry Sobolev used as prototypes: St Theophilus of Fool-for-Christ of the Kiev Caves (1788–1853) and St Sebastian of Karaganda (1884–1966).[46] Anatoly is depicted interacting with two groups: the lay people who revere him and in whose company he is often seen drinking tea at his small stoker's shed, and the monastic community into which he never completely integrates and whose members he teases permanently. In spite of his spiritual gifts, he bears the secret burden of a murder that he thinks he committed during the Second World War, an assumption which is only disproved at the very end of the film.

The critical functions of Anatoly are in keeping with those of the hagiographical fools. Through his theatricalized behaviour and metaphorical gestures Anatoly acts out the conflicts smouldering within people's own consciences and present in their relations with their neighbours. Anatoly assumes the status of an outsider: he has the lowest position in the monastic hierarchy because he has refused to take the habit and is in charge of the dirtiest place there as a simple fire stoker. He enjoys being marginalized for his theatrical and irreverent behaviour towards the other monks and the religious services. Yet his centrality is of a spiritual order: on a symbolic level he keeps alight the spiritual fire for the whole monastery. He is endowed with divine awareness and discernment of spirits, acting as a reflector and revealer of the monks' inner conflicts. His behaviour is metaphorical—his cleverly designed practical jokes are meant to redirect people's scrutiny towards themselves and point out their warring spiritual attitudes in an attempt to ease their troubled consciousness and unify their torn interiority.

Anatoly's unconventional behaviour and his profound penitential religiosity place him in stark contrast not only to the state's materialistic ideology but also to the formalism often practiced in the monastery. This positioning heightens his critical function against the norms of society and the Church. In this sense we witness a "folly within folly": an uncompromising immoderation within, as it were, what John Saward calls the monastic "counterculture".[47] A few episodes stand out as particularly revealing. Having heard of the healing powers of Anatoly, a mother brings her lame son to the island, as a last hope after the doctors have given up. She is a white collar worker very fond of her job. Anatoly cures her son but advises her to allow the child to receive communion the following day. She is extremely fearful and tearful that she is going to lose her job if she does not return to work the next day and so she decides not to wait. Anatoly has to snatch the boy from the returning boat and dismisses her anxiety using his clairvoyant abilities to assure her that all will be well. The critical suggestion is that fear of losing material possessions causes people to become enslaved to social systems and willingly sacrifice their freedom of mind. She is convinced that her boy cannot walk after Anatoly prays for him, even if she arrived with the hope

that he would. Even the boy, after taking a first few steps by himself, returns fearfully to his crutches and needs to be reassured that he no longer needs them. The woman and the boy cannot envisage a situation that contravenes the experiences of their material world. If there is no explicit criticism of the recent Soviet regime, Lungin points to a mode of being in the world which becomes automatically subversive to any totalitarian system, this happening when people retain an independence of mind and preserve their own freedom of action at any cost. Control is often not achieved in a violent manner, Lungin suggests, but insidiously through the uncritical acceptance of norms and conventions that come to regulate the mind.

In another, darkly humorous, episode in *Ostrov*, Lungin deliberately creates a situation where the abbot, Filaret, realises he is attached to wordly possessions and completely unprepared for death. Filaret's comfortable boots are burned and his favorite blanket is thrown into a lake, exposing the inconsistency between such self-indulging practices and his former ascetic ideals. Moreover, the fact that the boots were a gift from a bishop alludes to the Church's wordly accommodation and spiritual slackness at a time when it was assuming a subservient position towards the Soviet state. In another series of episodes Job, the treasurer of the monastery, is constantly reminded of his envious nature, especially towards Anatoly's charismatic gifts and of his hostile attitude, through a reference to the killing of Abel. The implication is that, frustrated in his search for vainglory, Job's envy and anger is a sort of killing, in intention if not in deed. Anatoly benignly makes fun of Job's obsession with cleanliness in order to show it for what it is: an attempt to hide those passions that have come to rule him. At the same time there is a subtext

Figure 2.2 Anatoly trying the coffin made by Job and prophesizing that his end is drawing near. (*The Island*)

with broader implications. What appears to be Job's malign inclinations—his obsession with cleanliness and his spying and informing on Anatoly in order to ingratiate himself with the abbot—all allude to practices that characterized the paranoia of Soviet society at large. As part of the process of purging society from elements inimical or not conforming to the Soviet ethos, the informants, recruited from all strata of society, played an important role.

Besides those elements which Lungin uses to ensure that his audience identifies Anatoly as a holy fool—the use of antics to deliver his prophesies and uncover the inner truth of his fellow beings, as well as his feigned madness—the story has a strong psychological ingredient. Due to this emphasis, *The Island* offers a new development away from the narrative usage of the holy fool. If, in previous Russian films, the holy fool ran the risk of becoming a symbol frozen in traditional patterns, used episodically to create a relation between two opposed poles of authority, in *The Island* the holy fool is no longer subordinate to the narrative but is explored as a protagonist in his own right. In parallel with various playful episodes the camera takes the viewer into the private moments of man's daily torment whereby he (falsely) believes that he cowardly took the life of his commander in World War II. In the most idiosyncratic Russian tradition the model of the holy fool is conflated with the sinner-turned-into-saint motif.

By doing so, Pavel Lungin achieves something that the traditional model of the hagiographic holy fool never attempted: he opens the door to an understanding of holy foolishness as a potentially viable alternative for everyone. In his rendition the radical quality that holy foolishness has acquired in Russian hagiography is 'tamed' by the director's attempt to illustrate some of the most cherished Orthodox spiritual and penitential practices. The element of scandal and controversy that usually accompanies the life of the holy fool is underplayed. This is because the viewer familiar with Orthodox spirituality can recognize the protagonist as a holy fool as well as gaining insights into his inner life of prayer and penitence at an early stage in the story: the fool's eccentricities are then easily interpreted in this key. Moreover, Father Anatoly is at times invested with the role of a *staretz* or spiritual father. This diminishes that otherworldly quality of the holy fool normally achieved through his/her loneliness and mysteriousness. As a consequence, the challenge posed to the viewer is also diminished; rather than overturning common religious assumptions there is a sense in which the viewer's expectations are met, particularly in a Russian context where Orthodox culture is dominant.

IURODSTVOVANIE OR PLAYING THE HOLY FOOL

The practice of holy foolishness in its customary guise presupposes an element of acting, at least in the Byzantine-Russian tradition where foolishness is understood to be a mask designed to conceal the sanctity of its

practitioner. In this context, the real holy fool is ultimately saved from accusations of imposture by the authenticity of his/her existential commitment to the role. However, this was not always the case. In order to account for cases of appropriation of foolish behaviour in Russian film for different purposes the term at hand is *iurodstvovanie*. To the best of my knowledge this idea is indicated by a special term unique to Russian culture, where it has been recognized as a distinct behavioural pattern having formal qualities of holy foolishness but lacking its substance.

Pavel Lungin offers an ample analysis of this practice in his *The Tsar* (2009), where it is combined with Ivan the Terrible's personal mythology of kingship. Here the figure of the historical fool who castigates Ivan the Terrible is suppressed while the Tsar himself is conceived as a sort of holy fool in reverse, an alleged latter-day saint figure disguised in imperial clothes. He is shown adopting for himself something of the awesome character of some Russian holy fools whose mysterious behaviour and acts—sometimes apparently cruel—were deemed to be beyond human understanding or at least having a hidden significance at odds with the *prima facie* interpretation of the facts. It is the coincidence of oppositional elements that underlies the construction of the holy fool and which makes the figure translatable to contexts that lack a positive spiritual significance. In the political sphere the appropriation of the holy fool's behaviour can become the basis for despotism, sanctioning any action of the sovereign.[48]

The film opens in the year 1565 and the *oprichnina*, Ivan's political police, are killing people and devastating villages. One girl, Masha, escapes and is saved from freezing by the abbot Fillip. Shortly afterwards Ivan asks the abbot to become the new Metropolitan (titular head) of the Church. Fillip's nephew, Kolychev, leaves to fight in the Livonian war. He returns defeated and as a result Ivan considers him a traitor and orders him to be arrested. Kolychev flees to Fillip who hides him, although the abbot then also falls under suspicion. Eventually, Ivan finds Kolychev and orders Fillip to judge him and his fellow fugitives. The Metropolitan refuses to condemn them in spite of the fact that they recognize their guilt, since he suspects that their confessions were made under torture. Ivan sends the accused to fight a bear, whereby Kolychev is miraculously saved by the same orphaned girl, Masha, holding the icon of Our Lady of Vladimir. Unfortunately, such salvation is only temporary as Ivan orders Kolychev to be cruelly tortured in the public square under the eyes of his uncle. For his refusal to condemn his nephew, the Metropolitan is dismissed by the Tsar and imprisoned. However, rumours of the Metropolitan's sanctity and miracle-working capacity are spread and so the film ends with a vengeful Ivan having him killed.

Lungin shows the feeling of an impending apocalypse to be the motivation for Ivan's irrational behaviour. His acts are justified to himself and to his subjects by the perceived imminence of the second coming of Christ. Ivan's religious mania can be explained by his transformation of general apocalyptic expectations into his own mission. He assumes this mission

which at the same time serves his own political interests and ambitions. In so doing, Ivan conceives himself as the apocalyptic forerunner of Christ. Two episodes in particular stand out. In the first the Tsar explains to Masha, taken away from Metropolitan Fillip and placed under his protection, that he had built his palace Alexandrovskaia Sloboda as a New Jerusalem with the coming of Christ in mind. In the second, Lungin depicts a religious cleansing ceremony in which the royal cart is pulled by virgins dressed in white, in a reenactment of Matthew 25:1–13. In Ivan's mind it is his mission to purge everything before the second coming, administering the justice of God as His earthly representative. The Tsar's predilection for the orphaned girl whose parents had been killed by his own men is another way of distancing himself from the sinners and associating himself with the unblemished. Masha is here portrayed as a *blazhennaya*, a blessed innocent, and Ivan's polar opposite.

It can be observed that Lungin's approach to the historical subject is peculiarly modern. In contrast with sixteenth century ideology which promoted the figures of the holy fool and the Tsar as beyond good and evil, Lungin deliberately presents Ivan as a fool without either sanctity or charisma. Lungin is playing with the difference between appearance and essence that is characteristic of the fool. The model of the holy fool was meant to convey the idea that under the mask of madness sanctity could be concealed. In the same way, Ivan projects an image of himself as a bloody tyrant in appearance while in secret he is an ascetic.[49] In the privacy of his residence at Alexandrovskaia Sloboda, he is shown in his cell wearing monastic garments, praying in front of his icons or publicly performing a ritual of repentance in front of the altar together with his personal guard, the *oprichniki*. By casting Pyotr Mamonov, who played the holy fool in *Ostrov*, in the role of Ivan, Lungin inspiringly uses the ascetical face of this actor to make a point to the audience. In his twisted way, Ivan expiates for the sins of his people and expects the unconditional support of his subjects. He reads historical events as God's responses to behaviour on earth, rewarding or punishing depending on people's religious devotion. On this conception, suffering becomes doubly justifiable: on the one hand it is the result of the sins of the people, on the other it is also intended as a means of purification. Therefore, the suffering that Ivan inflicts on his own people has in his view a redemptive character, the ultimate aim being to attract God's benevolence for his military campaigns and create the necessary conditions for the second coming of Christ. In an inversion of the traditional hagiographic fool, religion and politics here reinforce each other to create the mythology of Tsar Ivan the Terrible as defender of the faith.

I have previously suggested that there is a risk that proliferation of a certain phenomenon in a culture can cause it to lose its freshness and unpredictability. As Juri Lotman observes, through repetition and imitation even an extraordinary act can fall from the sphere of 'explosion', that is creativity, into the sphere of the habitual.[50] In this section I have showed how the

traditional hagiographic fool, now undergoing a revival of interest in Russian culture, can be appropriated and made to serve purposes that contravene its very *raison d'être*. In so doing, the viewer's familiarity with the holy fool figure can also cause it to lose much of its critical weight: a problem which is more acute in Russian culture today than it ever was under the Soviet period where the figure, although stripped of much of its Christian content, remained a powerful countercultural critical force. To understand the strength of this critical power we need to explore more thoroughly these stylized holy fools in Soviet cinema.

STYLIZED HOLY FOOLS

Under the Soviet Union, it was often difficult to express overtly religious content in film, and so directors often used the *iurodivyi* in a stylized form. In many ways, these stylized fools retained pointers that linked them with the functions of the traditional holy fool in Russian culture, most importantly their critical function. As with those holy fools that use explicitly hagiographic models, these derivatives have also led to some conceptual reworking of the holy fool paradigm, and have survived as important models in post-Soviet Russian cinema. Although their depiction departs from the 'canonical' iconography, the identification of these stylized figures as holy fools is reliant on literary precedents in Russian culture and similarity of function. These reworkings of the hagiographic paradigm have been facilitated by the fact that holy foolishness has functioned in Russia not only as a theological category, but also as a mode of popular religiosity.[51] Probably the first such explorations into the spirituality of the holy fool are Dostoevsky's characters Prince Mishkin in *The Idiot* (1868) or Elizaveta in *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880), figures to which many of the cinematic fools are indebted. Thereafter, the door was opened to a gallery of cultural interpretations, which Ewa Thompson calls 'stylized holy fools' in order to differentiate them from their more strictly hagiographic counterparts.[52]

WARTIME ROMANCE (1983)

The development of stylized holy fools was particularly strong in the 1980s as the Soviet system began to face serious questioning from within. One of the most notable instances of a stylized holy fool is evident in Pyotr Todorovsky's *Wartime Romance*. In the first part Alexander is a World War II soldier platonically attracted by Liuba, the mistress of a major who is killed in action. When they meet again after ten years, Alexander is a film projectionist studying to become a history teacher and already married. Liuba, now a worn-out street vendor, has a daughter. Alexander does everything in his power to help her, including selling her doughnuts for her and babysitting

her daughter. Alexander's love for Liuba has a nonphysical dimension, and his self-debasement as well as the risks he runs of losing his wife, friends and social position are ways of sharing in her misfortune. His mission is to help Liuba rediscover herself as a valuable and beautiful human being troubled by unfortunate circumstances. In one suggestive scene, he is projecting a Chaplin film in the cinema. The hint is apparent: Alexander has now become the Tramp, the character that Chaplin himself came to be identified with. On a symbolic level, it reinforces Alexander's depiction as a holy fool, in spite of the lack of references to religion.[53] The social behavioural model is rooted not in the ethos of the new Soviet man but in the pre-revolutionary 'kenotic' model of the Slavophiles, who cherished the ideals of humility, self-limitation, suffering and poverty.[54] At the time when *Wartime Romance* was filmed, the ideas of humility and willingly sharing in the suffering of others could not have been more at odds with the official Soviet aesthetic whose three supporting pillars were 'ideological commitment', 'Party-mindedness' and 'national/popular spirit'. This meant that films were supposed to contribute militantly to uncovering the communist 'idea' and oppose cosmopolitanism and bourgeois nationalism.[55] Neither was *Wartime Romance* in line with the heroic male paradigm of the Soviet mythology.[56] Under such circumstances, a subtle approach had to be used if one was to challenge these state-sponsored ideals. Todorovksy demonstrated that an alternative model of man could be promoted in a disguised form through the fool figure, masking his subversive criticism through the means of an unpretentious comedy.

REPENTANCE (1984)

With filmmakers dependent upon state sponsorship during the Soviet era, and suffering under a regime of strict censorship, it was unlikely that any overt criticism of the regime could be expressed in cinema. The advent of glasnost in the 1980s saw a mild relaxation of censorship that emboldened a more critical spirit. It was in this climate that a film emerged that questioned the recent Soviet past and authoritarianism (though it is notable it appeared at the periphery of the Soviet Union, far from the central bureaucracy). The Georgian director Tengiz Abuladze produced *Repentance* for Georgian television in 1984 and received political support from the local Party Secretary Eduard Shevardnadze, although the controversial nature of the film prevented its broadcast until 1986.[57] It was seen by Gorbachev during the same year, who, very much impressed, personally made it possible for the film to be widely distributed and enter public debate.[58] *Repentance* thereafter became a cult film of the 1980s and notable as the first to address directly the horrors of the Stalinist regime and, in the words of a Russian film critic, 'satisfy our tremendous thirst for truth and our urge to reevaluate the mistakes of the recent past'.[59]

The whole of Soviet society recognized its own traumatic past in Abuladze's political parable, and even its surrealism was deemed perfectly suited to describe accurately the show trials and mentality of the Great Stalinist Terror.[60] At the same time, Georgians saw the film as specifically promoting their own nationalist cause and customs.[61] In spite of this, the film was originally designed to have universal value. It is set in an imaginary time and space—contemporary at first sight but with anachronistic elements such as police forces dressed in medieval outfits and horse carriages—and was meant to undermine the viewer's instinct to establish a particular timeframe.[62] The figure around which the narrative is woven is not a specific historical individual but the 'universal dictator'—a composite caricature of Stalin, Hitler, Mussolini, Beria and Chaplin's 'great dictator'.[63] In addition, the character's histrionic side brings him close to Caligula and Nero. It was in this context that Abuladze made use of the holy fool figure to maximum critical effect.

Repentance exhibits an intricate construction *en abîme*, with two framing narratives, one real and circular, and the other imaginary, with its own fantasies and flashbacks. The story is narrated from the point of view of Ketevan Barateli, a cake decorator now in her forties who, in the first sequence, is seen finding out from the newspaper that the mayor Varlam Aravidze has died. This sets in motion her daydream, and all that follows happens in her subjective time with the exception of the final sequence. In her reverie Ketevan imagines herself as the defiant woman who digs out the body of Aravidze, is caught and brought to court where she gives her own version of the real character of the much-esteemed mayor. The flashbacks to her childhood years offer a complex portrayal of Aravidze as father, unscrupulous lover, corrupted leader, dilettante patron of arts and capricious dictator. Most of all he is shown in relation to her own family, as a persecutor of her parents, the painter Sandro Barateli and his wife Nino. They stand up for the old values of art and spirituality which the materialist Aravidze wants to destroy while keeping up the appearances of an enlightened leader. They are ultimately eliminated from the absurd world that Aravidze turns his town into, where 'four out of three persons are enemies'. Ketevan has thus a personal reason for digging him out because 'to bury him means to forgive him'. Her unexpected ally is his own grandson, Tornike, who cannot bear the lies and hypocrisy of his father and grandfather. Only Tornike's suicide makes his father Abel decide to dig out and throw Varlam's corpse into the sea.

It is in his characterization of Aravidze that Abuladze utilizes the trope of *iurodstvovanie* to such great effect.[64] Each different angle from which he is shown uncovers not a facet of his personality but rather a new mask since Aravidze lacks a stable identity. On his first encounter with the Baratelis his costume suggests the ambiguity of his character: he wears a white gown over a black uniform. On the one hand Aravidze seems to be sympathetic to Sandro, his art and his desire to save the town church from destruction, and is full of admiration for Nino's beauty, while on the other hand his

antics are meant to intimidate and have a symbolic subtext. When he visits the Baratelis his gift for Ketevan is a caged bird: an ominous sign of future imprisonments. His recital of Shakespeare's *Sonnet 66* on the same occasion, touching on the desecration of faith, honour and virtue, and 'art made tongue-tied by authority', is actually used as a riddle to foretell the ordeals that Sandro and his family will soon undergo. In the end the mask falls, revealing that the benevolent patron of the artists and art is nothing of the sort, instead he is all consumed by the desire to protect society from what he deems to be corrupting principles.

While Aravidze proves to be the unholy fool, Ketevan emerges as the true holy fool. This is not a case of cultural appropriation. In Georgia, as in Russia, the practice of holy foolishness came to be known quite early—already in eleventh century the life of Andrew the Fool circulated in Georgian translation.[65] Abuladze utilizes two *topoi* of holy foolishness: sacrilegious behaviour and symbolic gestures. Apparently Ketevan's digging up a corpse is a sacrilegious gesture, a personal vendetta. As the procurator points out it would be a case of believing that one can achieve a moral good through immoral behaviour. While her acts are objectionable on moral grounds, there is still a higher reason that takes precedence over moral prescriptions 'for Aravidze is not dead. As long as you defend him, he lives on and corrupts society'. Aravidze is not dead because he lives in the collective memory as a great man, the benefactor of his town. Ketevan's gesture is symbolic because the town has to confront its demons and call them by their real name. Abel's attitude is revealing of the refusal to pass any judgment on his father and on the past because 'those were complicated times'. But the danger is that by not incriminating the perpetrator for his crimes, the past continues to live on insidiously through the living and repeats itself through their attitudes and assumptions. This is true of Abel who is Aravidze with a human face. While his father was demonic and obliterated his enemies, he merely lacks moral criteria and prefers, as in the case of Ketevan, to send his enemies to the mental asylum. Ketevan's pronounced madness is saner than the unreasonability that passes as normality, but the system has now found milder forms of dealing with inconvenient truths, more suitable for the post-Stalinist generation.

In fact, what is left for the holy fool once old values have been obliterated and the people have been given new consciences? Abuladze suggests that the function of the fool is to keep alive the memory of the past, particularly a past that has been rewritten. Churches can be demolished but their memory should be kept alive, Ketevan seems to tell us through each cake which she symbolically decorates with a church. This had profound meaning for a society finding itself at a turning point in the 1980s. In this context the last line of the film must have sounded even more resonant to its Soviet audience: 'What good is [a street] if it doesn't lead to a church?' For Soviet cinema the film marked symbolically a moment of liberation from the censorship that had previously been imposed on religion.

KEROSENE SELLER'S WIFE (1989)

Alexander Kaidanovsky's *Kerosene Seller's Wife* raises similar issues to Abuladze's film. Set in Kaliningrad in 1953, *Kerosene Seller's Wife* is another *glasnost* film designed to revisit and critique the Stalinist past. The narrative line, punctuated with Christian symbolism and grotesque allegory verging on the surreal, features a Cain-and-Abel case in which a corrupted high rank Communist official, Sergey, deliberately provoked the death of a patient, for which his twin brother Pavel, took the blame. As a result Pavel, once a prestigious surgeon, has been demoted and is reduced to becoming a kerosene seller. He rises to the stature of a holy fool by assuming the injustices of social exclusion and destitution, which brings him closer to the outcasts of the community. His self-abnegation is designed to rack Sergey's conscience, which unfortunately never happens as he prefers to drown himself rather than renege on his Stalinist principles. The truth is only brought to light by an investigation into accusations of bribery-taking which a priest and his community have brought against Sergey, as a result of which Pavel tries unsuccessfully to take upon himself the blame for his brother's criminal activities for a second time.

That the director fashions Pavel as a holy fool is not only suggested by his having previously played the role of another fool in Tarkovsky's film *Stalker*, but is clearly indicated by his wife in the film who explicitly calls him a *iurodivyi*. Kaidanovsky's purpose is to contrast Sergey's ascension up the political hierarchy with his brother's utter degradation. Even the film's title undermines Pavel's status by bringing his relatively unimportant wife to the fore. Under Kaidanovsky's direction the behaviour of holy folly is employed to extreme effects, with grotesque images of Pavel in his repugnant fur coat crawling like a beast across the ice and mumbling indistinctively as a kind of mortification or atonement for his brother's deeds. As the priest's defeatist motto says, echoed by the police investigator himself, 'Victory is the refuge of the villain', which seems to be embraced by Pavel as well. Kaidanovsky's naturalistic use of the aesthetics of holy foolishness offers a sharp social criticism rather than moments of transcendence. The truth the investigator discovers cannot bring any relief to the victim since evil is endemic in society. In contrast, the truth Pavel seeks is shown to reside not in the external circumstances of 'who did it', but in the miraculous personal conversion of the criminal. 'I'm convinced that without the hope of a miracle life would lose its reality', Pavel tells the investigator. The miracle of Sergey's repentance and salvation never takes place since he has irremediably lost his soul in exchange for the honours granted to him by the Soviet regime. Only the police investigator is touched by fleeting visions of transcendence inspired by the presence of the priest and members of his community, but nevertheless he still decides to cover up the facts.

In keeping with his marginalized status, Pavel speaks very little all through the film with one exception, when the investigator is writing his final report at the police station. Like a prophet of doom, Pavel, in a trace-like state, launches a final diatribe against a society where spiritual death reigns supreme and the present regime, keeping the phantoms of the past alive in monumental art, is condemned by divine judgment. As Pavel continues his monologue the camera zooms in while his face changes dramatically to express the horror of this spiritual death of which society is unaware. Cutting to a blank red frame, the face of Sergey then bursts into the sequence to engage Pavel in a dialogue about the meaning of immortality. For Sergey immortality means being present through propagandist art as a repository of collective memory. Pavel replies by criticizing the way in which moral conscience and personal memory are erased in order to stifle any attempts to redeem the present. He asks: 'Who is guiltier than he who turns aside when he is told the truth or forgets crimes he himself has committed?' The present cannot be changed as long as it is populated by the dead and there is no acceptance of moral responsibility. In the film Pavel refers to the post-Stalinist present but the question of the quality of personal and collective memory that he raises is as relevant for the period of transition that glasnost represented. The same issue of personal and collective repentance that is central to Abuladze's film is raised in a different form here.

At the conclusion of his film, Kaidanovsky enhances Pavel's isolation on the fringes of society by placing him in a mental asylum where he is leader of the inmates. It is unclear whether this is the result of successful brainwashing or Pavel's realization that greater humanity is to be found within the asylum's walls than outside. Pavel ends by pounding exploding caps with a brick while church bells are heard in the distance: a measure through which Kaidanovsky enhances his protagonist's destitution. In a culture where holy foolishness was still alive in collective memory one could not fail to make relevant associations. Pavel is reminiscent of the historical holy fool Ivan Iakovlevich Koreisha (1780–1861) who spent much time in the mental institution to which he had been committed. It is also a direct allusion to the communist practice of institutionalizing 'enemies' of the regime on the grounds of insanity. It is significant that from the 1950s the number of the asylums in the Soviet Union ballooned from 40 to over 400.[66] This was in line with a more general interpretation of madness seen 'in relation of opposition to social and political institutions regulating the human mind, which become internalized as prevailing cultural assumptions'.[67] Through his use of Pavel as a stylized holy fool in a mental hospital, Kaidanovsky questioned the norms and fundamentals of a society that required the depersonalization of the human being in order to function. The critical force of his character enabled a trenchant distinction to be offered between self-denial as the last defence of humanity and the depersonalization practiced in totalitarian regimes.

RUSSIAN SYMPHONY (1994)

With the fall of the Soviet Union, stylized holy fools could begin to be explored in a specifically religious way in Russian cinema. One of the most striking examples is Konstantin Lopushansky's grim picture of a man who, realizing his own ungodliness, takes up holy foolishness as penitence. Lopushansky inherited from Tarkovsky the feeling of an impending apocalypse, a theme that became his main focus in four films: *Russian Symphony* (1994), *Letters from a Dead Man* (1986), *Visitor to a Museum* (1989) and *The Black Swans* (2006). Of these four, only in *Russian Symphony* is the apocalyptic vision specifically religious. The viewer is introduced into this atmosphere from the first lines of the protagonist's monologue in which he ruminates on the idea of God's judgment of history and on the last invisible battle between the forces of light and the forces of darkness. The protagonist Ivan Masarin is, by his own definition, 'a Russian intellectual', an 'heir of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky', given to continuous introspection, who is drawn into action by the gravity of the events. He makes it his mission to rescue the children in an orphanage that is going to be engulfed by flood-waters. Soon he realizes that the authorities are not going to help him as the Soviet empire is collapsing and they are preoccupied with saving themselves. The signs of the last days become manifest as the dead seem to emerge out of their graves in grotesque scenes. The only person he can find who is sympathetic to his intentions is a writer who calls Masarin a 'Myshkin' in reference to Dostoevsky's fool. But the writer proves only to be interested in the children's story as subject matter for a good novel and Masarin is no real Myshkin. Masarin realises that he actually feels no compassion for the children and it is only his mind that tells him the children must be saved. In a discussion with the writer Masarin explains his conception of life as a continuous role-play. Some play better than others but one player will be an impostor—the Antichrist. As the film progresses the faithful brace for the last battle and travel to Kulikovo, the site of an historical battle between the Russians and the Tartars. While they are waiting for the enemy, a dwarfish holy fool puts his ear to the ground to hear the Antichrist's coming. Masarin reappears now totally transformed into a stiff, self-important politician and tries to reassure the people that the children need nothing; they just should learn how to swim and save themselves. As he ends a storm breaks out, which brings forth chaos.

In many ways *Russian Symphony* completes its representation of holy foolishness where Lungin's *The Island* begins. Its final part follows the process of the protagonist becoming a holy fool. Masarin admits to himself that his logically thought out solution for the plight of the orphans makes him a murderer. He dreams of himself being dead and of an angel who cannot find clean shirts for him because his soul is not clean. Finally, Masarin realizes that the only important question in life concerns God. The last sequence is a long shot of him plodding on his knees in the snow, dressed in rags, with

Figure 2.3 Masarin's crawling as a penitent in the snow. (*Russian Symphony*)

a giant cross hanging on a thick chain around his neck all the while begging God for forgiveness. More than any other holy fool explored so far, Lopushanky's has a critical function to expose the inner problems of the soul. Empires can fall but, the director suggests, this split in human psychology between the mind and the heart can endure with fatal consequences.

The understanding of this dramatic change in the character hinges on a specific anthropological view of the human person which experiences a kind of dualism between the mind and the heart. Masarin's recurring statement that he is an 'intellectual', and his permanent introspection, are relevant for the subsequent development of events. Eschatological preoccupations played a significant role in shaping the thinking of Slavophile intellectuals in the nineteenth century and thereafter. Lopushansky draws his inspiration from this religious and philosophic tradition and shows the way this should be embodied. He makes clear that the idea about the eschatological sense of history and the type of action it entails should be rooted in a kind of spirituality capable of bringing the two into an organic unity. As Berdyaev summarises an ancient tenet of Orthodox spirituality: 'It is the mysticism of the heart which is at the centre of life. Therefore the mind must be united to the heart if there is to be any spiritual unity within'.[68] Otherwise the non-coincidence between the two is perceived internally as role-playing. The film enters into dialogue with Berdyaev's conception of personality as both a persona–a mask which ascribes a social role—and as capacity for communion.[69] It is the latter aspect that is deficient in Masarin, his heart lacking

the capacity to feel and bond with the children in need. Holy foolishness is employed here as a means to humble the mind and bring it under the control of the heart.

THE HOUSE OF FOOLS (2002)

Andrei Konchalovsky's *Dom Durakov/The House of Fools* (2002) offers yet another cultural transfiguration of the holy fool in the flourishing cinematic revival of the post-Soviet era. Its director co-scripted *Andrei Rublev* with Tarkovsky and his reworking of the theme of holy foolishness is, therefore, of great interest. He even establishes an arch in time between the female fools in each film, alluding to *Andrei Rublev*'s *durochka* through the use of the same insignia that came to be temporarily associated with both: the white outfit and horse. Anticipating my analysis of Tarkovsky in the next chapter, I should just note here that both depict female holy fools in conflicts where they seem to position themselves on the wrong side as a result of an apparent error or lack of judgment.

The House of Fools is a personal approach towards the recent armed conflict in Chechnya, a subject on which the director was criticized in Russia for his impartiality.[70] Konchalovsky had the diplomatic objective of making a film that aimed to alleviate the war wounds on both sides of the conflict—Russian and Chechen—a motive inspired by his pacifist spirit. Foolishness informs the vision of this film which is chiefly set in a mental institution in the Russian border state of Ingushetia, and becomes an extended metaphor that inquires into the rationale for the war. But in spite of its poetic quality and the luminous figure of Janna, the film's holy fool, the view of the war is gloomy. What is it that puts the machine of war into action in *The House of Fools*? The justification for it loses any relevance and the only answers that the film seems to offer are those involving irrationality. Otherwise the treatment of both the Russian and the Chechen soldiers reveals a human nature that is not altogether corrupted and unredeemable. A trace of human solidarity can be spotted in an episode in which the Russian soldiers want to exchange ammunition and the body of a Chechen for drugs and money. A possibility of bonding is affirmed between the two enemy captains when the Russian one discovers that the Chechen saved him in the Afghanistan war, a potential bond thereafter eliminated by the accidental shooting of the Chechen by a drugged Russian soldier.

The film has a number of different agendas, revealing the shapes that modern warfare can take. The metaphor of holy foolishness is used both to unmask political and institutionalized repression and to question the boundaries between madness and sanity. The film allows two contrasts: first, between the institutionalized world of madness and the outside world, in order to expose the radical opposition between the humane madness of the incarcerated and the inhuman one of the free people; and second

between different types of foolishness. Most of these types of folly have a rather benign form, more like idiosyncrasies that contribute to the individualization of each patient. This picturesque world poses a challenge to what normality is and to what is generally deemed as reasonable. It reunites a gallery of odd figures, whose political views deviate from those generally held, or whose peculiarities contradict normal social conduct.

The film would have been reduced to two political targets—pleading for the right to be different and the unmasking of institutional repression—if it were not for the remarkable character of Janna, who stands out through her deep humanity and non-violent nature. No clear reason is presented for her institutionalization in the asylum except perhaps for her romantic fantasies in which Brian Adams plays the role of her fiancé. For Janna the hospital is not a repressive space but a place where she can place herself in the service of the others. Her freedom is no longer coerced by conventionally restricted spaces. On a symbolic level she is fashioned in the mould of a modern holy fool. She remains faithful to her fantasy fiancé, in a manner similar to that of mystical love. In the midst of a mad world the melodic sound of her accordion playing gives us hints of an alternative world, while reminding us that 'We are alive because someone loves us'. She also encounters an extraordinary mysterious presence: an aged patient who thinks he is God. Handed an apple he imagines it to be the planet and refuses to consume it in spite of its inhabitants hopelessly 'loving and destroying each other for generations and dying'.

Janna's resemblance to the traditional holy fool is reinforced by Konchalovsky's use of the common *topos* of the fool as an object of ridicule. Janna courts ridicule when she accepts the mock proposal of marriage from a Chechen soldier, Ahmed. Her clownish make-up and her clumsy dancing underline the disparity between her and the world. It is her innocent trust

Figure 2.4 Janna playing her accordion surrounded by explosions. (*House of Fools*)

in the inherent goodness of human nature that ultimately convinces Ahmed to admit the insanity of his own world and the need for cure and salvation: 'I'm sick. I need to be treated." Through her apparent folly she provides a more compelling argument for peace to Ahmed than could have been achieved through a lifetime of reasoning.

WARD NO 6 (2009)

The revival of the trope of holy foolishness continues to flourish in Russian filmmaking. Russia's 2010 entry for the American Academy Awards' Best Foreign Film was Karen Shakhnazarov's and Aleksandr Gornovsky's *Ward no 6*: an adaptation of Nikolai Gogol's classic story. The formal qualities of the film contribute to the modern appearance of this screen adaptation of a Russian literary classic and suggest a renewed preoccupation with nineteenth century issues, chiefly with the theme of madness-foolishness as a form of higher perception. The film highlights foolishness in a pseudo-documentary style using fixed frames, a hand-held camera and silent home video recording, which contribute, together with the use of real inmates for the extras, to the blurring of the line between fiction and reality.[71] Gogol's short story on which the film is based was interpreted at the time of its publishing (1892) as a political allegory about the state's repressive structures, equating the madhouse, incidentally a former monastery, with a prison and ultimately with Russia itself.[72]

The tone of the story is that of a polemic, prompted by the ideological confrontation between the psychiatrist Ragin, and his patient Gromov, personifications of passivism and activism on the one hand and of atheism and faith on the other. The film is faithful to Gogol's work but, relocating the action to the present day, makes it explicit from the outset that Ragin believes the mentally deranged Gromov to be a prophet. We see Ragin's growing intellectual attraction towards Gromov in spite of the disapproval of the other doctors who question his purpose and methods. Ragin supports a fatalistic acceptance of one's fate as dictated by the system, devoid of any logic and morality, and even if he accepts that progress can be made theoretically, he claims the human condition will essentially remain tragic. Gromov foresees an era in which justice will prevail, his optimistic view being predicated on the premise of the existence of God and mankind's immortality. Humanity's progress, however envisioned, cannot solve the tragic condition of human mortality—this is a point on which the two agree.

Before long Gromov gains a position of ascendancy over his custodian, grounded in his capacity for suffering which is coupled with a remarkable capacity to scan the personality of the doctor, revealing the human weaknesses behind his philosophical stance. This is disturbing for the doctor: The sudden reevaluation of his principles impact his life in a way that does not pass unnoticed by his colleagues and he ends up locked in the same

Figure 2.5 Ragin is locked up as a mental patient. (*Ward no. 6*)

Ward no 6 through their 'well-intentioned' intervention. Apart from the political, social and existential issues that it raises, the film, as much as its literary source, is revealing about Russian society's ambivalent relationship towards madness. We see the tension between the deviation from the norms of reason on the one hand, and its compensatory exaltation as a form of clairvoyance and wisdom on the other. Holy foolishness recuperating here rediscovers its metaphysical forcefulness.

The above analysis of the holy fool in Soviet and post-Soviet Russian cinema has revealed the versatility of the figure as a critical device for filmmakers. Two key models are used. The first, and rarer, representation is the holy fool cast in the traditional hagiographical mould. In the Soviet era such representations were limited to historically located films, but in the post-Soviet era when it has been permissible to use overtly religious representation, the figure has been revived, most notably in the portrayal of Father Anatoly in Pavel Lungin's *Ostrov*. Anatoly's critical function goes here hand in hand with the role of spiritual guide, with the result that a call to reform our inner life becomes the main focus. This spiritual project is shown to be at odds with both the contemporary religious practice and the state ideology. In contrast with the hagiography-based figures, the stylised cinematic re-interpretations of the holy fool in Russian cinema have proved more powerful in their critical message and more imaginative in both form and content. As expected, in Soviet cinema the representations are few and do not bear explicit spiritual meaning and their critical force is limited. Once more favorable conditions arrived in the era of glasnost, representations of holy foolishness increased and began to manifest historic awareness. They were used as vehicle of criticism, particularly in connection to the Stalinist

period, but due to their metaphorical language had the potential to express general truths. The post-Soviet Russian cinema, with somewhat more freedom from political censorship, has voiced concerns with the present social and political situation in the country. Thus, the holy fool figure has been employed as a means of exploring eschatological ideas and expressing concerns about state-supported repression and war. There was one director, however, who more than any other transcended the traditional boundaries of holy foolishness in the Russian context, and it is his work that we shall now explore.

NOTES

1. From a concrete manifestation of sanctity the meaning of *iurodstvo* is expanded to the extent that it becomes a heuristic tool for the interpretation of culture at large. In her *Pravoslanie I Postmodernism* (Leningrad: University of Leningrad, 1991) Tatiana Goricheva depicts the holy fool as a postmodern saint. His/her theatricality and rejection of reason fit many postmodern characteristics. Sofia Malenkich argues against Baudrillard's theory of simulacra that the holy fool is actually a means of access to reality and the sacred ('Popytka jurodstva kak odna iz strategij sovremennoj kultuty', religija I nravstvennost v sekuljarnom mire: materially nauchnoj konferencii 28–30 nojabrja 2001 goda, Sankt-Petersburgh, 2001, 54–56, accessed May 20, 2010, http://anthropology.ru/ru/texts/malenk/secular_13.html; Mikhail Epstein points out the affinities of holy foolishness with the twentieth century Russian avant-garde in *After the Future: The Paradoxes of Postmodernism and Contemporary Russian Culture* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1995), 51–59.
2. Sergei A. Ivanov, *Holy Fools in Byzantium and Beyond* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 399.
3. Alexander Y. Syrkin, "On the Behavior of the 'Fool for Christ's Sake'," *History of Religions* 22 (1982): 150–171.
4. Mikhail Mikhaĭlovich Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 81.
5. Ibid., 224.
6. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), 159.
7. A.M. Panchenko, "Смех как зрелище" in Смех в Древней Руси, ed. A.M. Panchenko , D.S. Likhachev, N.V. Ponyrko(Leningrad: Nauka, 1984), 72.
8. Ibid., 80.
9. Ibid., 80.
10. Jacob Taubes, *From Cult to Culture: Fragments Toward a Critique of Historical Reason* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010), 79.
11. Taubes, *From Cult to Culture*, 90–93.
12. Jostein Børtnes, *Visions of Glory: Studies in Early Russian Hagiography* (Oslo and Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Solum & Humanities Press International, 1988), 33.
13. Like Kierkegaard's knight of faith, the holy fool can be unrecognizable from the outside, as Christ Himself is incognito at the incarnation.
14. Victor Shklovsky, "Art as Technique" in *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*, trans. Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), 12.

15. The connection between holy foolishness and defamiliarization has been suggested by Caryl Emerson in "Russian Orthodoxy and the Early Bakhtin," *Religion & Literature* 22 (1990): 109–131.
16. Peter M. Antoci, "Scandal and Marginality in the Vitae of Holy Fools," *Christianity and Literature* 44 (1995): 283.
17. Anton C. Zijderveld, *On Clichés: The Supersedure of Meaning by Function in Modernity* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul), 104.
18. John Dominic Crossan, *The Dark Interval: Towards a Theology of Story* (Niles, III.: Argus Communications, 1975), 53–56.
19. George Faraday, *Revolt of the Filmmakers: The Struggle for Artistic Autonomy and the Fall of the Soviet Film Industry* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000), 174.
20. Tim McDaniel, *The Agony of the Russian Idea* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 24.
21. Nicolas Berdyaev, *Origin of the Russian Communism* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1960), 10.
22. Ibid., 10.
23. Michael Cherniavsky, "'Holy Russia': A Study in the History of an Idea," *The American Historical Review* 63 (1958): 635.
24. Philip T. Grier, "The Russian Idea and the West" in *Russia and Western Civilization: Cultural and Historical Encounters*, ed. Russell Bova (Armonk, NY; London: M.E. Sharpe, 2003), 31.
25. Nancy Condee, "No Glory, No Majesty, or Honour: The Russian Idea and Inverse Value" in *Russian on Reels: The Russian Idea in Post-Soviet Cinema*, ed. Birgit Beumers (London: I.B. Tauris, 1999), 29.
26. Nadejda Gorodetzky, *The Humiliated Christ in Modern Russian Thought* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1939), 9.
27. The political connotations of the practice of holy foolishness were apparent to foreigners, who were more sensitive to these issues and less reluctant to talk about them. Thus, Giles Fletcher wrote in 1588 about the holy fools he encountered during his visit to Russia: 'They have certeyn eremites [whom they call holy men] . . . This maketh the people to like well of them, because they are as Pasquils, to note their great mans faults that no man els dare speake of. Yet it falleth out sometime, that for this rude libertie which they take upon them, after a counterfeite manner, by imitation of prophets, they are made away with in secret; as was one or two of them in the last emperours time, for beying over bold in speaking against government.', "Of the Russe Common Wealth" in *Russia at the Close of the Sixteenth Century*, ed. E.A. Bond (London, 1856), 119.
28. John Saward, *Perfect Fools: Folly for Christ's Sake in Catholic and Orthodox Spirituality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 28.
29. Svitlana Kobets, "The Paradigm of the Hebrew Prophet and the Russian Tradition of Iurodstvo," *Canadian Slavonic Papers / Revue Canadienne des Slavistes* 50 (2008): 1–16.
30. Tim McDaniel, *The Agony*, 45.
31. Given Russia's totalitarian past, these assertions might sound contradictory. The ideology of the ruler as God's appointee and guarantor of Orthodoxy kept in check the egalitarian impulses.
32. Saward, *Perfect Fools*, 28.
33. P.E. Boyko, "Stages in the Evolution of the Russian Idea in Our Fatherland's Historiosophical Thought," *Russian Studies in Philosophy* 45 (2006): 38.
34. Peter C. Bouteneff, "'What Kind of Fool Am I?', Further Gleanings from Holy Folly" in *Abba: the Tradition of Orthodoxy in the West*, festschrift for Bishop Kallistos (Ware) of Diokleia, ed. John Behr, Andrew Louth and Dimitri Conomos (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2003), 339–344.

35. Ibid., 344.
36. Joan Neuberg, *Ivan the Terrible* (London, NY: I.B. Tauris, 2003), 28.
37. Al Lavalley, Albert J. LaValley and Barry P. Scherr, *Eisenstein at 100: A Reconsideration* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 71.
38. Jolyon Mitchell, "Russia" in *Encyclopedia of Religion and Film*, ed. Eric Mazur (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2011), 377.
39. The historian G.P. Fedotov opines that Basil the Blessed, who is usually reputed with challenging Ivan and obtaining an end to the executions, could not have been an witness of the terror unlashed by Ivan's henchmen since he died in 1550 (*The Russian Religious Mind*, p. 338). Sergey A. Ivanov writes about a different holy fool, Nikola Salos, reputed with the same feats (*Holy Fools*, 296–297).
40. Ivanov, *Holy Fools*, 401.
41. Priscilla Hunt, "Avvakum's 'Fith Petition' to the Tsar and the Ritual Process," *The Slavic and East European Journal* 46 (2002): 483–510.
42. Lauren Elaine Bennet, *The Synthesis of Holy Fool and Artist in Post-Revolutionary Russian Literature* (Phd diss. University of Virginia, 2000).
43. The press kit for Around the World in 14 Films—The Berlin Independent Film Festival at Babylon, 2006, accessed October 1, 2008, www.berlinbabylon14.de/ger/presse/pr_russland.pdf
44. Ibid.
45. Per-Arne Bodin, "The Holy Fool as a TV Hero: About Pavel Lungin's Film *The Island* and the Problem of Authenticity," *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture* 3 (2011), accessed April 22, 2011, http://www.aestheticsandculture.net/index.php/jac/article/view/6365, 4.
46. Elena Jakovleva, "'Ostrov' vezenija: Avtor scenarija fil'ma 'Ostrov' Dmitrij Sobolev o vozmožnosti uspecha v naše vremja", *Rossijskaja gazeta, 02–28–2007*, accessed March 23, 2011, http://www.rg.ru/2007/02/28/sobolev.html
47. Saward, *Holy Fools*, 16.
48. Raoul Eshelman, *Early Soviet Postmodernism* (Frankfurt an Main: P. Lang, 1997), 49.
49. Panchenko notes that the historical Ivan wrote under the pseudonym Parthenius Yurodivyi, 76.
50. Juri M. Lotman, *Culture and Explosion* (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 2009), 45.
51. Svitlana Kobets, "Iurodstvo", accessed February 20, 2008, http://www.slavdom.com/index.php?id=35
52. Ewa M. Thompson, *Understanding Russia: The Holy Fool in Russian Culture* (Lanham and London: University Press of America, 1987), 133.
53. Andrew Horton and Michael Brashinsky, *The Zero Hour: Glasnost and Soviet Cinema in Transition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 189.
54. Gorodetzky, *The Humiliated Christ*, 15.
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3 Holy Fools in the Films of Andrei Tarkovsky

> The real can only be expressed through the absurd.
>
> Paul Valéry

Among all those directors working within the Russian cultural tradition, Andrei Tarkovsky deserves a special place. This is not only because the character of the holy fool assumes such an important place in his films, but also due to his outstanding contribution towards the modernization of the figure. In Tarkovsky's films the fool's critical power, while derived from Russian tradition, is lifted above this context and becomes a universal figure, capable of providing a radical critique of modern society.

One of the last sequences in his final film, *The Sacrifice*, is an intriguing illustration of this move. Using a combination of static and slow tracking shots, we watch a man meticulously clear a table and then place on it chairs covered with a white tablecloth. He drives one of his cars away from the house and returns to light the cloth. After turning on a tape player to listen to the sakuhachi flute, he leaves the house only to sit at some distance and watch the flames engulfing it. A short time later other inhabitants of the house return but he refuses to speak and explain his actions. The commotion increases until inexplicably an ambulance appears and he is taken away. The man is Alexander, a former actor, who pledged to make a personal sacrifice in exchange for the world's salvation. As we will see, this cosmopolitan mad man dressed in a gown with a yin and yang symbol printed on the back, listening to Japanese music and living on a Swedish island, is actually a descendant of the Russian holy fools.

In order to unpick the form that holy foolishness acquired in Andrei Tarkovsky's cinema, I will begin by examining those characters typically labeled as holy fools by critics, with the aim of outlining the development of the theme in Tarkovsky's cinematic imagination. While doing so, particular attention will be given to those elements that identify these characters as holy fools. The remaining section of the chapter will deal with the critical force and modernity that the holy fool acquires under Tarkovsky's directorial treatment. Part of this 'modernization', I argue, is due to a move

towards a vision which, although remaining rooted in one local tradition, aspires to universality, mixing traditions and featuring holy fools on a mission to save humanity. It was also designed as a move towards an existentialist conception of the holy fool, which added a fresh critical edge to the figure. In order to support this interpretation I will outline the affinities between Tarkovsky's ideas and Christian existentialism, in particular the theology of Søren Kierkegaard. Reading Tarkovsky through a Kierkegaardian lens will illuminate the former's critique of rationality in the modern age. With this established, we can better appreciate the dynamic transformation of the holy fool in Tarkovsky's cinema.

THE FUNCTION OF HOLY FOOLS IN TARKOVSKY'S FILMOGRAPHY

Holy foolishness is a recurring theme in the films of Andrei Tarkovsky (1932–86). What distinguishes him from those Russian directors discussed in the previous chapter is the fact that throughout his career he developed a distinct conception of holy foolishness that could be called 'Tarkovskian'.[1] It is framed by a particular existential philosophy of life, which, towards the end of his career, aspired towards a universal expression. Under this philosophy, the holy fool is developed as a unique figure capable of criticising contemporary society and modernity. The genesis of this idea can be traced quite early in Tarkovsky's filmography. His preoccupation started with his second feature film *Andrei Rublev* (1969), was continued through *Stalker* (1979), matured in *Nostalgia* (1983) and reached an apex in his final film *The Sacrifice* (1986). It might be significant to add that the only opera he directed, *Boris Godunov*, coincided with the period when his preoccupation with the idea of holy foolishness was at its most intense in the early 1980s. When Tarkovsky directed Mussorgsky's opera for the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden in 1984, he portrayed his second traditional holy fool, after the *durochka* (the female holy fool) in *Andrei Rublev*. The portrayal of this holy fool is striking: Tarkovsky added to the fool's traditional iron chains a hood reminiscent of those condemned to death, an idea developed in his last two films.[2] Moreover, one of his unrealized projects was an adaptation of Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*, itself a reworking of the hagiographical model of the holy fool, and to which he refers several times in his book *Sculpting in Time*.[3]

What was it that made Tarkovsky view the figure of the holy fool as a potent vehicle for his ideas? He drew from an Orthodox tradition that valorized the mad and madness to the highest degree by making them stand for that divine wisdom that surpasses all understanding. Therefore, the holy fool represents a spiritual sphere in his films and offers a transcendental perspective of human affairs. In this sense, the irrational truth and "amorality" of the fool appear on a higher plane than rationalism and lay morality

each of which, he believed, would ultimately lead to catastrophe and the destruction of human civilization. The holy fool, as we will see, was for Tarkovsky the last bastion of faith: a representation of 'what lacks in the world: the inner freedom and the faith, which don't know the impossible'.[4] In order to understand Tarkovsky's development of this theme, we should begin by exploring his relevant filmography while tracing the development and the way in which Tarkovsky's idea of holy foolishness materialized into a critical device.

ANDREI RUBLEV (1966)

The first film of Tarkovsky's to offer a powerful characterization of holy foolishness was *Andrei Rublev*, his second feature film, released in 1966. The film, shot mainly in black and white, is based loosely on the life of the eponymous fifteenth-century Russian icon painter and presents us with a complex situation. Tarkovsky focused the film on the spiritual and artistic growth of Andrei Rublev in a world that challenged his ideals in many ways. From the outset Rublev is confronted with what is only the first in a series of tensions: between the laughter and freedom of the lower classes, represented by the *skomorokh* —the traditional Russian street performer—and the oppressive attitudes of the authorities towards this kind of entertainment. This scenario is then replicated through the authorities' suppression of the pagan beliefs of some villagers, and by the betrayals and discord of the rulers, in stark contrast to the faithfulness and brotherly love of the common people.

It is on this troubled background that Andrei's personal drama is developing: his talent is first envied by his fellow-monks Daniil and Kirill, with the latter especially keen to discredit him in the eyes of the renowned master Theophanes the Greek. His plot is not successful but as the film progresses we become aware of the different positions that Andrei and Theophanes take on iconography, Andrei being inclined to see the good in people rather than their evil side. His artistic crisis, prompted by his revolt against the dominant fear-inducing variety of iconography favoured by officials, coincides with the appearance of the *durochka*, a female holy fool. Andrei's ideas are further tested during the Tartars' pillaging of the city of Vladimir, at which point he kills a soldier in order to defend the holy fool. As a penance he takes a vow of silence and non-violence, which makes him incapable of saving the *durochka*, who naively consents to leave with a Tartar in a later episode. Andrei's silence and refusal to paint are only ended after he witnesses the strenuous efforts of a boy to cast a bell guided only by his artistic intuition rather than craftsmanship. The first chiming of this bell finds all the strafing parties reconciled in an act of devotion and celebration, including the holy fool. One of the concluding shots startles by showing in colour Andrei Rublev's vibrant frescos.

Figure 3.1 The holy fool is disturbed by the church wall smeared with paint. (*Andrei Rublev*)

Holy foolishness underpins the whole directorial vision—narrative and imagery. Tarkovsky merged this with the concept of artistic creativity: a characteristic that constantly reappeared in his subsequent works. The conflation is not unnatural. Drawing from cultural anthropologist Victor Turner's theories, Lilia Avrutin argued that the artist shares with the holy fool the same anti-structuralist position which, in totalitarian societies, predestines him/her to suffering and social silence.[5] For Tarkovsky, who was acutely conscious that his moral mission was at odds with official Soviet ideology, this conflation offered both the advantages and disadvantages of marginality; that is, a weakness that could be turned into moral strength. As I will show later in the chapter, it is precisely such weakness that is reconfigured as a spiritual force in his major works.

Features of holy foolishness are spread among several characters in *Andrei Rublev*. The most traditional forms of the fool are to be encountered in the character of the *skomorokh*—the street performer, and of the *durochka*—a term used by Tarkovsky in his screenplay to refer to the unnamed female figure of the holy fool in *Andrei Rublev*. *Durochka* would fall under the category of *blazhenny*—the blessed idiot type discussed in the previous chapters. She is mute, a phenomenon that, as Alexander Panchenko has shown, points to the way in which silence and kenoticism are the features of the passive holy fool.[6] Moreover, social silence, as a conscious choice, can also be a 'sacred silence': 'a channel for communication with superior powers'.[7] The holy fool plays a very important role in Rublev's spiritual becoming since she forces him into action. By defending her from the violence of a Tartar, Rublev commits a murder, which provokes a further critical scrutiny of his values against the background of cruelty and violence. As an act of

penitence he decides to share in her silence, his gesture acquiring overtones of holy folly. At the other extreme, the *skomorokh* is very close in his external manifestation to the prankster type of the holy fool. If not for the episode in which he tries to exact revenge on Kirill, his obscene provocations could be taken as those of a holy fool deriding the vices of society. Nevertheless, to the extent that his profession exposes him to the persecutions of the official authorities, the *skomorokh* has similarities with the holy fool's voluntary submission to public humiliation and ridicule. In this sense, it is worth noting that Tarkovsky has him spread his arms in a crucifixion pose. Through the performance of the *skomorokh,* a transition is made towards more sophisticated artistic endeavors and forms of criticism.

An interesting expression of the idea of holy foolishness is associated with the other great iconographer in the film, Theophanes the Greek. Theophanes is a character constructed on a series of polarisations characteristic of the *iurodivyi*, the hagiographic holy fool: wisdom and foolishness, aggression and meekness, veneration and sacrilege.[8] In his first conversation with Rublev he is shown in the forest, resting his feet on an ants' nest, probably as a means of mortifying the flesh, thereby evoking the ascetic feats of the holy fools. In a previous conversation with Kirill he confesses that he used an icon to press cabbage. In the preceding sequence, Tarkovsky has Theophanes glimpse the world as an image turned upside down. This can be interpreted as a visual metaphor for the message that fools are trying to convey: 'in the kingdom of God reigns a complete inversion of our earthly values'.[9] On the contrary, it is our world that is upside down in comparison to the divinely appointed order. Jostein Børtnes translates this into aesthetic terms, which helps to explain how images of abjection may be used in an 'inverted symbolism where life on earth in its most humble and despised forms serves as the visible analogue of an invisible glory transcending the world of senses'.[10] This inversion of conventional patterns—ethical or aesthetic—is later replicated by Rublev, in both his rejection of the traditional fear-inducing way of representing the Last Judgement, and in his declaration that the *durochka* is not a sinner for having failed to follow St Paul's injunction to cover her head. Even if Andrei Rublev does meet enough of the attributes of holy foolishness to qualify as such a figure, the vow of silence he makes after his spontaneous killing of the Tartar that has captured the *durochka* can be read as a kind of protest specific to the behavioural model exhibited by the passive holy fool.

Last but not least, there is one further instance of holy foolishness residing not in the *what* but in the *how* of the story. Visually this is achieved by the narrator through an alternation of sublime and grotesque images emphasising the disparity between the spiritual and the physical, which is complemented by an unconventional arrangement of the events at the level of the plot.[11] Thus, when the narrator breaches social conventions by showing scenes of nudity, desecration and violence, he appropriates the iconoclastic behaviour of the holy fool who 'mocks all the forms of

legalism that can turn Christianity into a code of rules'.[12] This is in keeping with what Tarkovsky himself reveals about his art: 'I am drawn to the man who is ready to serve a higher cause, unwilling—or even unable—to subscribe to the generally accepted tenets of a "worldly" morality'.[13] This moral vision is supported by a paradoxical art, not unlike the contrarian nature of the holy fool, which juxtaposes images of sacrilegious devastation and ugliness with images of mysterious beauty. One such instance is in the scene showing the desecration of the Vladimir cathedral which concludes with a starkly beautiful view of snow falling inside the ruined walls. As Tarkovsky explains: 'Hideousness and beauty are contained within each other. This prodigious paradox, in all its absurdity, leavens life itself, and in art makes that wholeness in which harmony and tension are unified'.[14] In terms of cinematic style Tarkovsky's iconoclastic approach is just as unconventional. The *fabula* is undermined by numerous ellipses which can leave the viewer uncertain about the development of events, as seen in the case of Rublev's encounter with the 'pagan' young woman on Midsummer Day, or the unexplained reappearance of the abducted *durochka* at the end of the film. All these features are designed to 'decentre and destabilize the viewer's sovereign point of view', thereby creating the conditions for new meanings to emerge.[15]

Tarkovsky was intensely aware of the critical function of the holy fool, and in *Andrei Rublev* he masterfully used the figure to demonstrate how far authority falls short of the moral precepts of love and humanity. As we saw in the case of Eisenstein's *Ivan the Terrible*, the implied criticism of Soviet authority is masked by the distinct historical setting of the film. In the case of *Andrei Rublev*, holy foolishness exposes the moral failings of the church authorities first and foremost. Tarkovsky depicts Rublev's agony over his commission to paint the Last Judgment, knowing that he cannot in all conscience depict it according to the iconographical canon approved by the Church authorities. This conflict with the authority of the Church is implied, and we sense that a Church keen on enforcing a religious artistic vision is consolidating its worldly power at the same time.

The Orthodox Church is depicted in *Andrei Rublev* in a subordinate relationship with state power, but at the same time it is using that power to consolidate its own through a mutually profitable symbiosis. In one of the first episodes after Andrei leaves Andronikov monastery, he encounters a group of peasants on St John's Day, which coincides with the summer solstice: an occasion for ritual celebration in pre-Christian cultures. Following the old pagan traditions, the peasants perform rituals of fertility. For centuries, forms of Christian belief (as proved by one of the peasants making the sign of the cross) had mixed with pagan rituals and these coexisted in the newly Christianized territories. The men of the Grand Duke, representatives of the state authority, are shown by Tarkovsky trying to catch and punish the peasants. Andrei witnesses this alliance between the state and the Church in suppressing any form of religiosity that departed

from official ideology. Later, the presence of the female holy fool reinforces the distance between the official powers—be they lay or ecclesiastical—and communal principles.

The female holy fool here stands for 'Holy Russia' and for an ideal of community that is opposed to any autocratic tendencies. The tension between the 'communal principle' represented by the Russian people and the autocratic ambitions of various political leaders corresponds to the 'panslavic' historical thinking as embedded in the 'Russian Idea'. According to this movement, the people are the bearers of a unifying principle, and its fundamental values are purity of heart, spiritual life and communal traditions.[16] Political power, when devoid of these principles, becomes innately destructive, as Tarkovsky is keen to show. The most prominent conflict in *Andrei Rublev* is political, between the Grand Duke and his brother. The Duke's brother allies with the Tartar army in order to attack the city of Vladimir, betraying his brother, his people and ultimately his faith. Confronted with the cruelties of the massacre that follows and the desecration of the Cathedral, he is filled with remorse. In two flashbacks he recalls the oath of allegiance and concord that he and his brother were forced to swear in the Cathedral, and how he was made to kiss the cross before the Metropolitan. This makes it even more obvious that his present betrayal has broken the bonds of brotherly love as well as divine law. Ultimately, it is a betrayal of the people who embody the two, as shown in the passion play performed by the peasants that Rublev imagines during his talk with Theophanes the Greek. Rublev's appreciation for the unlearned peasants is reinforced by images which show them as the only ones interested in the divine drama. The play is as mute as the *durochka*. Her silence points to a surplus of meaning that cannot be contained by the human word, just as in the apophatic theology to which the holy fool bears resemblance. If for Tarkovsky the Trinity epitomizes 'the ideal of brotherhood, love and quiet sanctity', the Russian people are the very embodiment of this ideal.[17] Tarkovsky's use of the same actor to play both the Grand Duke and his brother suggests not only a terrible tearing apart of the common nature that all human beings share, but also the inner fragmentation and drama that human beings can experience when they entirely submit to evil inclinations. Even Rublev sins by taking a life while trying to defend the *durochka*, failing to follow the principles by which he would like to live. Ultimately, Rublev's vow of silence that he takes after the killing as a form of penitence is an act of resistance to the prevailing social morals and practices.[18]

This communal principle should be extended beyond the national entity, Tarkovsky seems to suggest, in another interesting episode related to the fool. When the *durochka* encounters again the vicious Tartars, she is the only person capable of establishing a bridge with what seems to be the untouchable and dehumanized other. In one fleeting moment the Tartar who is making fun of her simplicity scrutinizes her eyes and

seems fascinated: It is a moment of communication beyond the realm of words, of peering into the depths of the other person and encountering something there– in her all-encompassing charity and total vulnerability, the image of the Other. Is there perhaps a possibility of redemption even for those who embody evil? The durochka's abduction by a Tartar leads to her recovering her integrity, beauty and purity, as the scene showing the casting of the bell reveals. In the person of the holy fool it appears that God's love can be extended to the fiercest enemy and can ultimately triumph over evil.

As an historical film, *Andrei Rublev* might seem anchored in the realities of the century it presents, but as its creator confessed it was also considered to have relevance for the epoch when it was made:

> We wanted to show that Andrei Rublev's art was a protest against the order that reigned at that time, against the blood, the betrayal, the oppression. Living at a terrifying time, he eventually arrives at the necessity of creating and carries through all of his life the idea of brotherhood, love for peace, a radiant worldview, and the idea of Rus's unification in the face of the Tatar yoke. We found it extremely important, both from the historical and the contemporary viewpoints, to express these thoughts.[19]

'The Tartar yoke', like the Soviet regime, and any other historical instantiation of power, is again seen in opposition to the communal values of the people, a people whose protest paradoxically finds its 'voice' in the mute *durochka*.

We can conclude that holy foolishness, from its first manifestations in *Andrei Rublev*, is creatively employed by Tarkovsky in order to reveal its traditional meaning: 'the radical contradiction between the Christian truth and both the common sense and the moral sense of the world'.[20] While the director draws here on a traditional model of holy foolishness, its features are spread across a number of characters. Tarkovsky returned to the idea of holy foolishness in each of his last three films —*Stalker, Nostalgia* and *The Sacrifice*, in surprising but much less traditional ways. The most unlikely literary texts were serving as sources of inspiration for Tarkovsky by the 1980s. He found in the science-fiction genre an ideal medium to express his ideas in a way that could deflect the suspicion of the censors of Goskino, the central directory body of Soviet cinematography. Tarkovsky's increasing disillusionment with the Soviet authorities caused him to use imaginative ways of criticizing the authoritarian political and social system that had been fostered. The metaphysical substratum of his scripts can hardly be overlooked. Both his first film based on a science-fiction story *Solaris* (1972) and the later *Stalker* (1979) can be read as parables disclosing the existence of another reality beneath the cruel surface of the contemporary material world.

STALKER (1979)

By the later 1970s Tarkovsky was suffering something of a crisis in his personal and professional life. He was becoming increasingly disillusioned with the Soviet authorities, who were strongly critical of his 1971 film *Solaris* and placed restrictions on its distribution. Meanwhile, his next project, an adaptation of the Strugatsky brothers' novel *Roadside Picnic*, which was to become the film *Stalker*, was frustrated by serious delays, compounded by the heart attack that Tarkovsky suffered in early 1978. During this time, Tarkovsky's disenchantment with the material world increased, and his late films show a powerful interest in the spiritual life. The religious undertones of *Stalker* are made explicit by Tarkovsky late in the film when we hear in voice-over the passage from the *Book of Revelation* (6:12–17) about the sixth seal. This is followed shortly by a recitation of the first verses describing Jesus' appearance on the road to Emmaus (Lk. 24:13–18) from which the topographic and onomastic references are omitted. Who are the three figures on the road and what is this Emmaus that are they after? Three characters set off on a journey through the Zone, in search for the Room, where one's desires are to be fulfilled. The Zone itself is a mysterious land, supposedly created by an alien civilization, governed by its own natural laws, which the authorities are striving to keep off limits. Only the 'stalkers' can guide someone there and back unharmed, since the partly apocalyptic, partly paradisiacal landscape is allegedly rife with dangerous traps. Proof that the meaning is allegorical is found in the names of the three protagonists, each being indicative of their worldviews and mission: the Scientist, the Writer and the Stalker.

The Stalker is fashioned by Tarkovsky in the mould of the traditional holy fool, by way of an emphasis on his humility and simplicity. A look at the screenplay, based on the Strugatsky brothers' novella, *A Roadside Picnic*, and published in *Science-Fiction Anthology No 25* (Moscow, 1981), confirms this, revealing the numerous changes that the text saw under Tarkovsky's pen. The affirmation of the wife of the Stalker: 'You know, my mother was dead against it. He was a real tough, the whole street was terrified of him. He was handsome, and sure of himself . . .' becomes: 'You know, my mother was dead against it. You've probably realized how he's like. One of God's holy fools . . . The whole street used to snigger at him. He was so pathetic, such a mess'.[21] Even the film's text contains an explicit reference to the Stalker as an *iurodivyi*: After explaining his purely altruistic reasons for being a guide into the Zone for the desperate people, the Writer concludes: 'You are just a God's fool'.

Tarkovsky directs the camera to scrutinize the Stalker's appearance in order to reveal the characteristics of a marginalized fool: His head is shaven, his face is marked by the hardship of his life and his clothes are worn out. He looks vulnerable and ineffective, in keeping with his creed

Figure 3.2 Stalker having apocalyptic visions. (*Stalker*)

that 'weakness is a great thing and strength is nothing': a clear reversal of worldly values. Tarkovsky himself confessed a particular attraction towards human weakness which is capable of disclosing a different kind of strength, different from the affirmation of the self at the expense of others, and revealed in 'the capacity of a human being to make a stand against the forces which drove his fellows into the rat race, into the rut of practicalities'.[22] This was a moral idea that Tarkovsky followed throughout his work, as he confessed in one of interviews.[23] This helps to explain why he found in the archetype of the holy fool and the paradoxes that underlie it an ideal vehicle to express his criticisms of contemporary society. In 1979 when the film was released this celebration of human weakness could not have been more at odds with Soviet aesthetics and ideology. The twist that comes towards the end of the film reveals that this broken man, an outcast with no social ambitions and with spiritual aspirations at odds with the official materialistic ideology, is actually a well-read intellectual. As the Stalker lies down on the floor deploring the Scientist's and the Writer's lack of faith, the camera zooms out to reveal the books that cover an entire wall of the decrepit house. This type of intellectual could not be more different than the 'self-assured, integrated and infallible' hero promoted in socialist realism.[24]

NOSTALGHIA (1983)

In Tarkovsky's final two films, his critique of contemporary society reached a new level, and it is here that he transformed the role of the holy fool into a universal opponent of modernity. It is no mere coincidence that these final films were completed in Western Europe, or that in 1982 Tarkovsky made the decision never to return to the Soviet Union, since these elements ensured that the critical dimensions of his films had a wider applicability. In *Nostalghia* a new idea, that of the human sacrifice, comes to the fore, working in a tandem with holy foolishness. The protagonist, the Russian poet Andrei Gorchakov, visits Italy in the company of a local translator, Eugenia. His purpose is to research the life of the eighteenth-century peasant musician, Pavel Sosnovsky, a Russian serf sent to study in Italy but who preferred to return home, where he committed suicide. Just as did his subject of investigation, Andrei suffers from nostalgia for his country, and also for his wife and son. But with Tarkovsky things are never quite what they seem at first sight. What appears to be the natural result of a geographical dislocation, a nostalgic longing for home, acquires a higher significance when Andrei meets a native recluse, Domenico, whom everybody thinks mad for his apocalyptic views: these being so extreme that he has incarcerated his family in his house for seven years waiting for the end of the world. But, I would suggest, it is this madman who is the crucial figure for understanding the critical power of the film. In a revealing interview, Tarkovsky outlined his vision of the character:

> Domenico also stands for the constant search for the meaning of life, a meaning to the concepts of freedom and insanity. On the other hand, he is in possession of the receptiveness of a child and the extraordinary sensitivity often found in children. . . . the somewhat mad Italian is simple, no beating around the bush, and convinced that he in his own enlightened outsidedness has found a solution to the general problem. . . . He is 'the fool' who accuses 'the normal' of being too lazy, and sacrifices himself so as to shake up his surroundings, thus underlining his own warning. This is his sacrifice and it is all he can do. His intention is to force us to act, to change the 'now'.[25]

It is evident that Tarkovsky ascribed to Domenico's madness a spiritual significance. At the same time we see expressed in just a few sentences a directorial vision that subscribes to the main characteristics of the holy fools: inner freedom, irrationality, child-likeness, marginality, *imitatio Christi* and provocation. The last sentence reveals the role that Tarkovsky ascribes to his holy fools: to provoke us into action, to shake off the complacency of the viewers.

Tarkovsky writes in *Sculpting in Time* that nostalgia overcomes Gorchakov because he remains unable 'to find a balance between reality and the

harmony for which he longs, in a state of nostalgia provoked not only by his remoteness from his country but also by a global yearning for the wholeness of existence'.[26] This 'wholeness of existence' manifests itself in Gorchakov's inner struggle to 'abolish borders', as part of an attempt to unify three levels of existence: the moral—the dream-like memories of Russia and his wife, belonging to the past; the aesthetical—the Italian ancient cultural heritage and his translator Eugenia; and the spiritual, manifested in Domenico's world.[27] Only Andrei doubts that Domenico is deranged and he argues that the mad are closer to the truth. And indeed, Domenico's mysterious 1+1=1 demonstration is the mathematical formulation for what Andrei is experiencing and the solution for his existential crisis. In this respect, Domenico seems to manifest the clairvoyant powers of the Russian holy fools and the enigmatic language in which they hid their prophecies. When Andrei visits Domenico he is exercising on a stationary bicycle, possibly a metaphor for the futility of seeking resolutions outside the self when the real problem lies inside the human soul. For Andrei the unity he has longed for in life is achieved only by his death, by absorbing his aesthetic and moral values into the spiritual. It is the accomplishment of the act of faith Domenico has asked for that achieves the stasis of the final shot. Andrei is shown sitting on the grass with Domenico's dog on his left-hand side and a Russian *dacha* (house) and trees in the background. As the camera tracks back the whole landscape is revealed to be surrounded by the walls of a ruined Italian cathedral.

Domenico's mission is not, however, restricted to single individuals. As he confesses to Andrei, he was wrong when he sequestered his family for seven years in a desperate attempt to save them: 'My motives were

Figure 3.3 Domenico delivering his diatribe atop the equestrian statue of Marcus Aurelius. (*Nostalghia*)

egotistical when I tried to save my family. You should save everyone'. If he entrusts Andrei with the mission to cross St Catherine's pool with a lit candle, he reserves for himself a much more difficult task. As Domenico explains in his speech to the audience on the Capitoline Hill: 'It must be sunny at night and snowy in August', which means a reversal of human values if not a total transformation of the world as we know it. In order to call the world's attention to his message he proceeds with an act of self-immolation. The solution is irrational in its radicalism. And yet, it is not so abhorrent and alien in a Russian context. Under the reign of Tsar Peter the Great the most zealous of the Old Believers, a dissenting movement in the Orthodox Church opposed to Peter's new reforms, chose to go 'into the forests and burned themselves, preferring a baptism of fire to life under the yoke of Anti-Christ'.[28] For his protest against society's indifference to spiritual matters, Domenico chooses Rome's Capitoline Hill, the citadel of the earliest Romans. Ironically, his diatribe, ending with: 'What kind of world is this? If those who are mad call out to you—be ashamed!', is uttered very close to the heart of the Catholic religious world. In spite of its very serious tone, the scene has something grotesque: as with Alexander in *The Sacrifice*, whose matches seem to fail him at first, the *Ode to Joy* that was supposed to serve as a musical background for Domenico's self-immolation, comes to a halt while he is still writhing on the pavement, shrieking in pain. As Slavoj Zizek notices: 'What elevates Tarkovsky above cheap religious obscurantism is the fact that he deprives this sacrificial act of any pathetic and solemn "greatness", rendering it as a bungled, ridiculous act. . . . Rather, Tarkovsky follows here the long Russian tradition whose exemplary case is Dostoevsky's "idiot" from the novel of the same name'.[29] The observation points to Dostoevsky's Prince Myshkin, arguably the most important literary influence on the conception of the Tarkovskian holy fools, but is also in keeping with the grotesque aesthetic underlying the paradoxical construction of the holy fools, which we have explored in the previous chapter. The holy fool is here a bundle of opposites, oscillating between the extraordinary and banal; the sublime and grotesque; and the transcendent and abject.

THE SACRIFICE (1986)

In Tarkovsky's final feature film, *The Sacrifice*, Domenico's supreme offering is matched by that of the central character Alexander, who renounces everything he possesses, including his family, in order that the world can be spared from a nuclear disaster. Following a regular signature device of Tarkovsky, the film oscillates between everyday reality and dream-like sequences. Alexander, a professor of aesthetics and a writer, lives with his family—his wife, son and step daughter—in a remote place, the only 'intruders' into this closed space being his friend Victor, a doctor and a rationalist, and the postman Otto, a collector of strange stories. The news of a nuclear

disaster disrupts the apparent peace of the family and Alexander pledges to renounce everything if the world is saved. At the same time he turns to their servant Maria for help, urged on by Otto who thinks that she has miraculous powers and the tragic end of the world will be avoided if Alexander is intimate with her. Although it remains unclear which of Alexander's acts has worked, the next day all returns to normality, as if nothing has happened.

Alexander is an intellectual whose moral aspirations have been stifled by the lack of spirituality around him. When the occasion for heroism presents itself, he welcomes it: 'I have waited my whole life for this'. A former actor, whose most successful roles were impersonating two extremes of character: Prince Myshkin, the personification of goodness, and Richard III, the embodiment of evil, Alexander strives for an authenticity and sense of life he can only find in sacrificing himself for the salvation of the others. The burning of the *dacha*, the Russian summer house that is a recurrent image in Tarkovsky's films, is a symbolic act. It can be used metaphorically to represent the human body, in which case Alexander's final act can be interpreted not only as a renunciation of materialistic concerns but also as a denial of his self.[30] In this interpretation his descent into madness is just the result of this total surrender into God's hands and marks the beginning of his spiritual regeneration. In other words it is a journey from the sphere of the aesthetic into the sphere of the religious.

This last film offers the highest artistic expression of Tarkovsky's thinking and it has been rightly considered a summation of his work and his spiritual testament.[31] It opens with a parable from *The Sayings of the Fathers*, a fourth-century collection of stories about the Christian desert hermits. In the original context it is meant to illustrate 'the fruits of obedience': At the request of his spiritual father, a disciple waters daily a withered branch which, at the end of the third year, sprouts. I would like to suggest that Tarkovsky employs it here to point to the possibility of the impossible, which can only be stated from a position of faith. It explains the radicalism and incomprehensibility that the gestures of both Domenico and Alexander imply, which presuppose a Kierkegaardian "leap of faith". I will return to this motif shortly.

In both *Nostalghia* and *The Sacrifice* holy foolishness abstracts the hero from the usual order of things and places him in a position from which he can launch a critique of the fundamentals of this modern world. Both Domenico and Alexander, existentialist characters who take upon themselves responsibility for the entire world, want to save humanity from the domination of materialism, spiritual bankruptcy and, ultimately, what they think is disaster. Both have a sense of the imminence of the end of this world, which Tarkovsky also shared.[32] The eschatological imperative is one of the key elements that form the holy fool paradigm. As Sergey Ivanov observes, the task of the holy fool is 'to serve as a reminder of Christianity's eschatological core. The holy fool wants to shake up the world because it is "lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot" (Rev. 3:16)'.[33] The holy fool does not

destabilize this world in order to return it to the previous *status quo* as part of a cycle of eternal return. For him/her the idea of time is eschatologically oriented and every human creation falls short of perfection and is therefore in need of restoration.

This eschatological dimension is incorporated by Tarkovsky into his fools through the idea of salvation. He conflates the image of the holy fool with that of the saviour. The Stalker believes that he can save people from the despair and unhappiness that have become their second nature. Domenico thinks that he is called not only to save his own family from spiritual death but the whole of humanity. The fate of the whole world seems to be dependent on Alexander's actions. For Tarkovsky the individualistic principle is not in contradiction with the communal. As he noted in his diaries: 'The time has come for individual prowess. The banquet during the plague. You can only save everyone else by saving yourself: in a spiritual sense, of course'.[34] What makes the holy fool suitable for this mission is not only their assumed marginal status but also a kind of implied androgyny. In other words, they unify in themselves the two genders, in order that they can redeem both.[35] For instance the Stalker is masculine but has feminine characteristics: he is well built but at the same time 'neurotic'; Alexander is wearing a woman's shawl on the night of the disaster and a gown with the Yin and Yang symbols the next day.

The primary issue that concerns Tarkovsky in these late films is spirituality and its absence. In his last three films the spiritual void is taken for granted. Engulfed by materialism, the modern society, Tarkovsky seems to imply, lacks spiritual guidelines, even in corrupted form. Mankind already lives in a spiritual wasteland. The images of this wasteland abound. In *Stalker*, with the exception of the vegetation in the Zone everything else is dominated by neutral industrial landscapes. Even in the Zone the landscape bears the marks of a catastrophic event, possibly a nuclear war. In the protagonist's apocalyptic dream, a fragment of the Ghent Altarpiece (1432) representing John the Baptist is shown beneath the water, partially covered in detritus, a symbol for the obsoleteness of faith. In *Nostalgia* the pool of St Catherine is shown either full of steamy water whose curative properties are sought by people preoccupied only with their physical immortality as Domenico puts it, or emptied, with cleaners scouring for junk. In *The Sacrifice* life is threaten by the imminence of a nuclear war. Images of the terrible event haunt Alexander's visions. In a more profound sense nuclear war is used as 'an equivalent or embodiment of desacralization on a global scale'.[36] It is this loss of spiritual values that Tarkovsky thinks is at the root of the bankruptcy of our civilization.[37]

There are other issues that undermine the fabric of society. Both Domenico and Alexander are critical of the irresponsible use of rationality to promote a technological progress that encourages a culture of domination and ecological crisis. In *Stalker* the camera shows images of desolate industrial landscapes outside the Zone, as well as what looks like a nuclear

disaster inside the Zone. Domenico's 'We must go back to the main foundations of life, without dirtying the water' can be taken literally to refer to the water of St. Catherine's pool, seen full of debris in a previous sequence, or in a metaphorical way as referring to the primary waters over which the Spirit of God was hovering. Alexander points out the fact that technological progress has been engineered to serve humanity's instinct of domination and has often been used for violent purposes. The accusation of reliance on 'power, fear and dependence' to rule might be seen to be directed towards Soviet totalitarianism, but it could also be extended further. This situation is due, in his view, to a disharmony between the material and spiritual development of humanity, in which spiritual progress has failed to match technological advance.

By placing these ideas in the mouths of his holy fools, Tarkovsky has no intention of undermining them. On the contrary, these are arguably very close to his own opinions. It is not difficult to see an intentional identification of the director with his protagonist Andrei: a connection borne through both having the same name and finding themselves in a similar situation in Italy, far from their homeland. It is plausible that the director also saw elements of himself in Domenico. It is through Domenico's last words on the Capitoline Hill that Tarkovsky pays homage to his mother to whom the film is dedicated: 'O mother! The air is that light thing that moves around your head and becomes clearer when you laugh.' *Nostalgia* and the *Sacrifice* were filmed during the director's self-exile in the West. Coming from a totalitarian regime, he was disappointed with the state of affairs in the West and deplored both situations:

> . . . the Soviet Union is already beyond redemption; and even in Western Europe people seem to take a delight in surrendering their own personalities in the belief that something will be gained by creating a so-called new society.[38]

The holy fool's agency matches Tarkovsky's artistic creed, in which he attributed a prophetic quality to his art, able to awake in mankind that conscience 'which keeps watch and forbids a man to grab what he wants from life and then lie back, fat and contented'.[39] It would not be an exaggeration to understand Tarkovsky's artistic mission as conceived in terms of the cultural model of holy foolishness. This would not, however, render him less modern. The use of the figure of the fool for the purpose of self-portraiture is a familiar trait of modernism, by which the author aspires to make a statement about the human condition.[40] The figure of a holy fool can only add a spiritual dimension to the director's critical look.

In Tarkovsky's view, the only answer to this 'terrible disharmony' that humanity is experiencing is an act of self-sacrifice. At this critical point in humankind's history holy foolishness is all that can play a redemptive role. We come full circle to the question of self-sacrifice: in the Tarkovskian world

the holy fool is not only a critic, but a saviour as well. He/she is not, however, a saviour in the traditional mould. To explain Tarkovsky's use of the fool, we need to explore in a little more detail his 'mission' which, although indebted to the specificities of Russian Orthodox religious culture, moves beyond it, opening the figure to universal application while addressing the problems of modernity.

THE HOLY FOOL MEETS MODERNITY

My aim in the remainder of this chapter is to offer an explanation for the ways in which Tarkovsky transformed the holy fool as a vehicle for critiquing society. The director's transformation of the figure requires study of two related aspects: the move towards universalisation, in which the figure, while remaining faithful to a Russian mindset, is abstracted from a direct Russian context; and also a progression toward a conception of the holy fool as a critic of modernity. In order to ground the legitimacy of this interpretation I will outline how Tarkovsky held close affinities with Christian existentialism. In particular, I will argue that viewing Tarkovsky's last films through a Kierkegaardian lens provides fresh insights into his treatment of the figure. This is not to say that Tarkovsky was retreating into his own theological world. On the contrary, this grafting enabled Tarkovsky to voice his critique of modernity in a way that was far more palatable and germane to the Western viewer.

I would like to emphasize that Tarkovsky's conception of holy foolishness, in spite of the sinuous evolution that I will describe, retains its defining characteristic: that of being a radical manifestation of Christian kenoticism.[41] All the Tarkovskian characters that I have discussed share a philosophy of life that is encapsulated in the way that the director describes Alexander: 'This is a man who has understood that, to redeem himself, it has become indispensable to efface himself'.[42] Compared to the original hagiographical model, the ascetic component of the fool is in marked decline here, no longer featuring as one of the primary concerns. However, the kenotic idea itself implies, as Kobets argues, a series of features such as meekness, self-abasement, voluntary poverty, humility, obedience, 'non-resistance' acceptance of suffering and death, all being characteristic of ascetical endeavour.[43] But where these features are present in the cinematic characters, they are not part of an intended ascetic practice nor, with the exception of *Andrei Rublev*, set in a monastic environment. This innovation did not originate with cinema, but first manifested itself in literature. The clearest example is Doestoevsky's Prince Myshkin in *The Idiot*, a figure of intense interest for Tarkovsky. Using the model illustrated in the previous chapter, very few of the Tarkovskian holy fools are cast in the traditional hagiographic mould; most are actually what we might call 'stylized holy fools', akin to Myshkin.

A second reason for the eclipse of the ascetic feature in Tarkovsky's fools has to do with the director's state of mind during the shooting of his last three films. It is usually termed as 'the apocalyptic mood' and it is a recurrent state of mind in Russian culture, to the extent that it could be considered endemic. Not only have communities of people manifested this during Russia's troubled history—religious dissenters in particular—but also generations of intellectuals, especially in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.[44] This 'led to the expectation of a violent end to the existing world and a radical transformation in the situation of the apocalyptic believers'.[45] Tarkovsky became increasingly enticed by this mood, even delivering a speech on the Book of Revelation in London in 1984 in response to an invitation from the Piccadilly Festival, an annual celebration of film, theatre, music and poetry.[46] This feeling of an impending end to the conventions of modern society shaped the Tarkovskian holy fools to a great extent, and it explains why their foolishness is not ascetical but a response to these very special circumstances, requiring a radical act of self-sacrifice. Indicative of his mood, on March 5, 1982, Tarkovsky wrote in his diary this prophecy of a desert father about the people of the last days, as recorded in *The Lives of the Desert Fathers*: 'They will not lead the monastic life at all; but disasters will overcome them, and they, the victims of disasters and temptations, will turn out to be greater than us and greater than our fathers'.[47] His latter-day holy fools are the result of this sort of apocalyptic anticipation. The sacrifice by fire is an idea that originates in the *Book of Revelation*, in which John of Patmos talks about 'gold purified by fire' (Revelation 3:18). Stylistically, the emergence of this state of mind is reflected in an ascetical cinematic style in which Tarkovsky restrains from indulging in the sensuous, a kind of minimalist tendency that began to take form in *Stalker*.[48]

In this sense, Tarkovsky's fools can be understood as forming a renewed connection with the Pauline text (1 Corinthians 1–4) as lived tradition. Tarkovsky reconnects to the very source of spirituality that first conceived the tradition of Christian holy foolishness, and this is the reason why, when compared with other Russian directors, he does not engage with an instrumental usage of tradition. In this respect it is not entirely correct to talk about the way he reworked an existing cultural model. Tarkovsky is not only participating in a conversation with a literary tradition (in which Dostoevsky plays the main role) that has passed on to him a certain literary canon, but he is also engaging with a lived spiritual tradition in which holy foolishness is not purely a means to provoke but an existential standpoint. The latter connects him directly to the Pauline text in his First Epistle to the Corinthians. In this way, I would like to argue, in Tarkovsky's final films he goes beyond the boundaries of his own culture in an attempt to reach out to a world in an advanced state of desacralization and lacking in faith. His later characters are not pious ascetics who have left their isolation in order to challenge the world and suffer humiliations, as in many of the hagiographical writings, but rather people who live ordinary lives in a

secularised world (with the notable exception of Andrei Rublev). This is how Tarkovsky conceived of Alexander in *The Sacrifice*:

> He represents my idea of a certain type of individual. His inner world is that of a man who hasn't gone to church in a long time, who perhaps was educated by a Christian family, but who no longer believes in any traditional way, and perhaps no longer believes at all. I can envision him, for example, impassioned by Rudolf Steiner, with questions of anthroposophy . . . I can also imagine him as someone who is aware that the material world is not all there is, that there's a transcendent world waiting to be discovered. . . . And when misfortune arrives, when the horror of a terrible catastrophe is imminent, he turns to God in a manner befitting his character, to the only hope which remains for him.[49]

And indeed Tarkovsky incorporated these ideas into his script in the exchange between Alexander and the eccentric Otto:

> 'And what is your relationship with God?'
> 'I haven't one, I'm afraid.'
> 'Don't be too upset by it, and don't fret. And don't expect anything'
> 'Whoever gave you the idea that I was expecting something?'

The question is, however, followed shortly by his recognition that: 'I've been waiting for this all my life'.

I would like to suggest that with Tarkovsky we have a conscious move towards a translation of 'things Russian' into a universal language: one that would be palatable to a Western audience as well. It is arguable that this is how the criticism offered by Tarkovsky's former collaborator Andrei Konchalovsky needs to be understood, when he complained that Tarkovsky had 'moved from Orthodoxy to Catholicism, Protestantism even'.[50] Konchalovsky added that 'in his final films Tarkovsky tried too hard to be like the later Bergman in incorporating complex philosophical concepts into his work; lacking Bergman's literary skills and his profound psychological understanding of his characters, he succeeded only in undermining his own major talent as a visual poet'.[51] It is true that Tarkovsky had great admiration for the Swedish director Ingmar Bergman's art, but his move seems to have been rather prompted by the particular circumstances in his life once he decided to continue his artistic career in the West. Tarkovsky's last two films, *Nostalghia* and *The Sacrifice*, are the product of this period of self-exile. Some of his previous films had already participated in and been rewarded at prestigious international festivals, but the problem of cultural translation came into acute focus at this time, prompted by the necessity of making himself understood by a primarily non-Russian audience. As evidence of his preoccupation with the idea, one of the most important issues in *Nostalghia* is the (im)possibility of cultural

translation. As he tells one of his interviewers: 'Art is culture, culture is the soul and memory of the people. There must be the possibility to transmit, to communicate culture: because only through this communication, this exchange, can man arrive at his entirety'.[52]

The last part of Tarkovsky's artistic career can, therefore, be described as evolution towards a conception in which holy foolishness takes on a universal, less traditional form in *Nostalghia* and *The Sacrifice*, with the former film trying to reconcile the East and West, while still giving a nod to the Russian utopia. For this purpose, the cultural model of the holy fool, with its non-dogmatic, anti-structural component was an ideal form of expression. Domenico is not a Russian, in spite of embodying much of the maximalism and irrationality of the Russian spirit; neither is Alexander, but he appreciates the art of both Leonardo da Vinci and the Orthodox iconographers. We witness a progression towards a religiosity that exists, paradoxically, within and without the boundaries of national ideology, and the transformation of the 'Russian Idea' into a universalism stripped of national connotations in *The Sacrifice*. In this respect Tarkovsky was not far from one of the basic premises of existentialism that 'all authority has been destroyed and individuals are radically isolated in their quest for truth'.[53]

THE INFLUENCE OF DOSTOEVSKY AND KIERKEGAARD ON TARKOVSKY

A second thread in Tarkovsky's use of the holy fool as a critic of modernity was the way he used his characters to question conventional rationality. At the root of Tarkovsky's move towards developing a new conception of the holy fool was his interest in existentialism, which emerged as both a modern movement and a critique of modernism.[54] This lent to Tarkovsky's thinking a modern language and a critical edge–one that was more accessible, or in any case more palatable, to a Western audience. What is at stake here, however, is more than a problem of reception since Christian existentialism, and particularly Kierkegaard's philosophy (pitted against Hegel and rationalism) helps us better discern Tarkovsky's critique of modern rationality. In this context it is not without significance that Kierkegaard fashioned himself as a holy fool in his critique of the 'spirit of the age'.[55] Meanwhile, Tarkovsky saw himself as developing and completing in many ways the self-sacrificing fools depicted in the novels of Kierkegaard's kindred spirit: Dostoevsky. Understanding the significance of self-sacrifice and faith in his characters is essential because Tarkovsky's critique of the modern world lies in what is expressed through the lines of his characters as much as in their action. If their actions were to be relegated to an obscurantist, reactionary directorial attitude, the critique itself would suffer. In other words, it is important to establish that the critique is not flawed

from the very beginning but is existentially assumed, with the ensuing directorial risks.

Tarkovsky is, like many Russian religious thinkers, greatly indebted to the proto-existentialist Dostoevsky not only for the conception of his characters but also, in more general terms, for the problem of faith, which the Russian novelist acutely posed in his writings.[56] He arguably considered himself to be a continuator and developer of Dostoevsky's ideas, which, he thought, had been left incomplete.[57] It was in his approach to the general spiritual crisis and through his critique of materialism that Tarkovsky found the spiritual foundation for his films.[58] Significantly, he also inherited from Dostoevsky concerns with the problems of inner freedom and free will, and the distrust of reason, which all feature high on the existentialist agenda. Almost the whole existentialist range of themes and concerns are to be found in Tarkovsky's written and cinematic work: freedom, consciousness of existence, free will and responsibility, alienation and despair, as well as the rejection of instrumental reason.

In order to explain the relevance of Christian existentialism to the cultural model of holy foolishness, particularly in the form professed by Kierkegaard, we need to identify their points of contact: both are a in a tense relation with human rationality. As B.P. Fedotov points out: '*Salia* always remains irrational—a disinterested impetus to madness which claims a religious motivation. This motivation is free from all practical and moral consideration'.[59] Christian existentialism and holy folly also emphasize the importance of conscience and subjectivity—as Kallistos Ware underlines: 'the fool is guided not by objectivized "laws", but by the voice of God speaking directly in the heart. . . . He bears witness to the preeminent value of *persons* rather than *rules*'.[60] Furthermore, for both the holy fools and Christian existentialists freedom is paramount—as has been observed: 'The wonderful inner freedom which animates them is the result of their total renouncement of the worldly things, their family life and even their psychic balance or the mental health'.[61] Finally, both are characterized by a sense of religious individualism. B.P. Fedotov even identifies 'absolute individualism' as the main feature of holy foolishness.[62] This last assertion needs qualification in the sense that albeit an individual enterprise, it is done in the name of communal principles: It is not the individual good that is pursued but the common good, which is valid for the Christian existentialism as well. For these reasons holy foolishness can easily find in Christian existentialism a philosophical ally.

Given these inherent affinities, it becomes clearer how it was possible for Jaroslav Pelikan to make a case for Kierkegaard as a modern holy fool, one whose 'madness permitted him to see, more clearly than most, the blasphemy of identifying the Holy and the True, as he was able to face up to it with a consistency and a rigor that only the mad and the half-mad can afford'.[63] His argument is based on Kierkegaard's attack on intellectualism on the grounds that it stultified morality, it

bred an arrogant dogmatism and there were other ways through which truth could come. Most importantly, his critique of intellectualism was launched from the standpoint of faith.[64] There are two important claims that render Kierkegaard very close to what the holy fool purports to stand for: that a person's knowledge of God is a personal communion and truth is subjective in the sense that all objective knowledge fails when confronted with the Holy, because the Holy is beyond mind's capability of understanding.[65] Therefore, from a Kierkagaardian standpoint, the fool's practice of renouncing his/her mind in order to attain enlightenment would be a justifiable one. Moreover, the ways in which the Danish philosopher and the holy fool think of their mission is similar: both envisage themselves as bringing a corrective spirit to a faith that has been derailed from its right course.[66]

It is possible to argue that Christian existentialism was, for Tarkovsky, the last stronghold from where he could launch his critique of modernity. Tarkovsky was clearly familiar with Kierkegaard the thinker. His diaries mention a Kierkegaard biopic as a possible future project. There is also a long interpretative tradition in Russia, initiated by another religious existentialist, Shestov, who claims that Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard are kindred spirits and that they basically share similar philosophies.[67] That Dostoevsky had a great influence of Tarkovsky cannot be disputed, and he acknowledged it himself.[68] In the absence of more detailed evidence, we can identify the key relationship between Tarkovsky and Kierkegaard as stemming from their understandings of madness, sacrifice and the absurd, concepts that highlight the problems with modern rationality. Clarifying the issue of rationality and the absurd is crucial for understanding the Tarkovskian holy fool and his criticism of the world, and can help us understand the full power of the holy fool as critic.

THE PROBLEM OF THE ABSURD: THE CRITIQUE OF RATIONALITY

The treatment of irrationality in Tarkovsky's last three films is crucial if we are to explain why Tarkovsky makes recourse to such extreme figures as his holy fools. Turning the fools into critics of rationality was an important development for Tarkovsky. As Maria Turovskaya pointed out, his final three films form a trilogy in which he continues to explore the same idea, taking it to its logical conclusions: 'The subject matter, from the point of view of normal logic, is of course absurd, but it seems so natural an extension of *Stalker* and *Nostalghia* that we are surely justified in regarding these three films as a trilogy, even within the context of the one long 'work' with which Tarkovsky was engaged throughout his life'.[69] The problem of the absurd is always linked in Tarkovsky with the problem of madness: in each of the cases of the Stalker, Domenico

and Alexander, their madness is predicated on what appears to be their 'absurd' self-sacrifice.

When questioned about his intentions, Tarkovsky never denied that he could see the absurd side of the sacrifice, but he also pointed out that the other side of the action is its salvific quality:

> But this faith [Alexander's] seems in a certain sense to border upon the absurd . . . That's only natural! For myself I think if someone is prepared to sacrifice himself, he can be called a believer. Of course, it's strange . . . Alexander sacrifices himself and at the same time demands that everyone else sacrifice themselves . . . it's a bit absurd. But what can one do? Without a doubt, in everyone's eyes he's lost; but that which is absolutely clear, is that he is saved.[70]

The idea of sacrifice is, therefore, directly linked to the question of faith, which was a constant preoccupation for Tarkovsky throughout his life. As he explains, the absurd is the result of a material perspective only, not of the spiritual:

> My protagonist can no longer go on living as he has done before and he commits an act that may have been born out of despair but which demonstrates to him that he is still free. Any such act is likely to appear absurd on the material plane, but on the spiritual plane they are magnificent as they create the possibility of a rebirth.[71]

This is similar in spirit with the advocatory position Johannes de Silentio adopts in Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* (1843). He makes a case for faith by virtue of the absurd using the biblical episode of the killing of Isaac by Abraham. While Tarkovsky explains the absurd as emerging from a perspective on the 'material plane', Kierkegaard looks at it from the perspective of universal moral law:

> [Abraham] acts by virtue of the absurd, for it is precisely absurd that he as the particular is higher than the universal. This paradox cannot be mediated; for as soon as he begins to do this he has to admit that he was in temptation (*Anfechtung*), and if such were the case, he never gets to the point of sacrificing Isaac, or, if he has sacrificed Isaac, he must turn back repentantly to the universal. By virtue of the absurd, he gets Isaac again. Abraham is therefore at no instant a tragic here but something quite different, either a murderer or a believer.[72]

This stark observation about the absurdity of true faith was recollected by Tarkovsky. In *The Sacrifice*, a parable from the *Lives of the Desert Fathers*, recounting a withered tree that John Kologa watered daily as instructed by Elder Pavva, frames the action of the film. The unabridged

version that Tarkovsky took down in his *Diaries* contains a moral imperative too: 'By the end of the third year the tree sprouted and brought forth fruit. The elder took the fruit and brought it to church to the community and said to them: "Come, taste the fruit of obedience"'.[73] Apparently, the parable is about obedience but in a more profound sense, and one that Tarkovsky perceived, it is about faith. The first meaning Tarkovsky ascribes to the parable is related to the power of the ritual: 'But a method, a system has its own virtues.' In this sense it is similar to Gorchakov's repeated carrying of the candle across St Catherine's pool. But afterwards Gorchakov discovers the power of the singular act that can lead to salvation. This is predicated on a faith in the possibility of the impossible. In less dramatic terms, the parable serves the same purpose as the biblical episode of Abraham and Isaac in Kierkegaard's interpretation: It is faith, by virtue of the absurd, that calls into question the very rationality that derides it.

The importance of Abraham and Isaac for Tarkovsky has not gone unnoticed by critics. Kovacs and Szilagyi observed of Tarkovsky's final characters that: 'From an ethical point of view Domenico is a murderer and a madman (as Abraham is a killer); from a religious point of view he is a just person, a believer like Abraham'.[74] On the other hand Peter C. Christensen writes that 'acting on the basis of faith may appear to be either sin or madness. An outside observer can never know definitely'.[75] This 'suspension of the ethical' happens in the case of what Kierkegaard calls 'the knight of faith', which he identifies with Abraham.[76] What does Kierkegaard mean by the 'suspension of the ethical'? He distinguishes between three different spheres: aesthetic, ethic and religious. Within the religious sphere, he claims, the laws of the ethics are suspended for a higher purpose, which renders the act of faith unaccountable to the ethical:

> . . . within the rationalistic view of ethics, there is no question of a teleological suspension of the ethical. If there is such a teleological suspension of the ethical, then it means that the case is outside the ethical view of life. What Jahannes means by a teleological suspension of the ethical is that the ethical sphere as a whole is suspended for the interests of a higher telos outside the ethical sphere. The person who is involved in this teleological suspension of the ethical sphere by accepting a telos outside the ethical is also outside the ethical sphere by the act of faith.[77]

With religion we are in the sphere of supreme subjectivity, where 'madness and truth become in the last analysis indistinguishable'.[78] It is of course a subjective truth, born out of a complete dependency on God. But it reinforces the position of the holy fool as representative of divine wisdom and implicitly legitimizes all the judgments he or she makes with regard to the

ways of the world. By choosing to make his madmen the embodiment of the highest values, Tarkovsky defies the cold rationalism that has entered all spheres of modern life, from religion to technology. He sees it as the root of all evils: It first perverts the human soul before corrupting all that humankind creates. It moves the focus from God to man through a blind faith in the power of human faculties to find the answer to all questions. Or, as Tarkovsky emphasized, 'Before claiming to contribute to the development of humanity, he [man] must realise that he is dependent on God'.[79]

Tarkovsky illustrates the flaws of modern rationality by using his holy fools to expose its limitations. The cold, destructive rationality of the scientist in *Stalker* is subordinate to the reformed, converted mind of Domenico in Tarkovsky's subsequent film, who has undergone a process of *metanoia* (literally 'a change of mind'—a term used technically with spiritual implications). The Scientist wants to put technology in the service of destruction, planning to blow up the Room of Desires, which the Stalker believes to be the last chance of happiness for man. In the Scientist's mind, it is better to eliminate from people's lives that which cannot be understood and controlled. In stark contrast, Domenico is a mathematician who has reached the conclusion that it is possible for 1+1 to make 1. According to scientific laws this is absurd, and impossible, but he demonstrates experimentally to Andrei that it works for oil drops. Domenico uses it in the spiritual sphere and turns it into a formula for unity. His apparently irrational, absurd sacrifice is performed in the name of the same unity. Technology is used for the same constructive purposes: the tape that plays the *Ode for Joy* at the time of Domenico's immolation 'happens to break on the word "Brüder" (German for brothers), encapsulating the dying man's hope for universal brotherhood that will transcend pervasive apathy'.[80] As a counterpart to the Scientist, Domenico asks who is the real fool in this upside-down world: 'What kind of world is this? If those who are mad call out to you—be ashamed!' This is replicated by Alexander in *The Sacrifice*, questioning in his self-imposed silence what kind of world this is in which religiosity is considered madness and the mad are institutionalized, just as he is seized by doctors and taken away in an ambulance. It is noteworthy that Tarkovsky came from a country where the numbers of mental institutions had risen dramatically, from 40 to 400 across the 1950s and 1960s.[81] They were designed not only to incarcerate political dissenters, but there were also laboratories where the 'new Soviet man' was created, if not by his/her own initiative, by sheer force. By contrast, Alexander lives in a free world: His madness remains as misunderstood and confinable. In this context, Tarkovsky's criticism acquires caustic tones.

From where then does the authority of Tarkovsky's modern holy fool originate? What is it that distinguishes him from his courtly counterpart, the wise fool? Tarkovsky believed that true spiritual authority was derived from self-sacrifice, without which it was merely an exercise of worldly power. He

saw the rescue of freedom and moral autonomy from materialism as a precondition for the rediscovery of self-sacrifice in the human soul:

> The sole means of returning to a normal relationship with life is to restore one's independence vis-a-vis the material things of life and consequently reaffirm one's spiritual essence. In this film I deal with one of the aspects of this struggle for anyone living in society: the Christian concept of self-sacrifice . . . if one acquires a moral autonomy, one may discover within oneself a capacity for self-sacrifice.[82]

For Tarkovsky, therefore, the holy fool's ultimate power to challenge society lay not merely in words but also, to an even greater extent, in his actions. This action, in order to be effective, needed to take the form of a self-sacrifice that would baffle the mind and force the complacent into action.[83] It is from this assumed position of self-sacrifice, verging on the absurd, that the Tarkovskian holy fool launches his criticism.

If in the previous chapter we have seen how the holy fools functioned as critics of Russian society, and engaged in a dialogue over national concerns, in this chapter I have demonstrated that the Tarkovskian holy fools are committed to a universal mission, illustrated most forcefully in the director's last films, *Nostalghia* and *The Sacrifice*. It is clear that Tarkovsky relied on the traditional paradigm of holy foolishness for some of his characters in *Andrei Rublev*, although even in this relatively early context the holy fool coalesced with the artist in an attempt to transcend the limitations imposed by concrete reality. In the 1970s we find Tarkovsky attempting to escape national boundaries, so that *The Stalker*, with its screenplay based on a science fiction work, marked a transition towards a conception of the holy fool much less anchored in a specifically Russian context. The move becomes obvious in *Nostalghia* and *The Sacrifice*, both created during Tarkovsky's last years in self-exile. Here the holy fool is no longer satisfied with a life sacrificed daily on the altar of spiritual guidance like in *Stalker*, but wants to save the world through an act of radical self-offering. The radicalism of the solution is best understood in the light of Kierkegaard's concepts of subjectivity and faith by virtue of the absurd. For Tarkovsky the absurd functions similarly as a way of critiquing modern rationality which, he believes, is opposed to that total commitment to faith unveiled in the act of sacrifice. From this fundamental criticism of the modern world, a cluster of other targets grow: the alienation of the human being, the loss of communion with fellow beings and God and the ecological damage and potential for domination that has accompanied technological progress. In this apocalyptic atmosphere Tarkovsky revised the figure of the holy fool, adapting its functions to launch a damning critique of modern society and rationality. His holy fools do not cry for the end of human civilization, but instead plead that we must regain the necessary equilibrium for life to continue.

NOTES

1. Tarkovsky does not explicitly use the term 'holy foolishness' to refer to his authorial conceptions, although he does refer to the idea of 'God's fool'. But, as I will show, the evidence from his writings, interviews and his films shows that his designs correspond to what is designated by the association of the two terms.
2. Irina Brown, "Tarkovsky on London: The production of *Boris Godunov*" in *Tarkovsky*, ed. Nathan Dunne (London Black Dog Publishing, 2008), 367.
3. Andrei Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time: Reflections on the Cinema* (London: Bodley Head, 1986), 42, 188, 193, and 213.
4. Balint Andras Kovacs and Akos Szilagyi, *Les Mondes d'Andrei Tarkovsky* (Lausanne: L'age d'homme, 1987), 157.
5. Lilia Avrutin, "Shostakovich on Screen: Film as Metatext and Myth," *Russian Review* 56 (1997): 403.
6. Robert Otto Efird, *Life Beneath Surface: Narration in the Early Films of Andrei Tarkovsky* (PhD diss. University of Virginia, 2007), 224.
7. Avrutin, "Shostakovich," 404.
8. Efird, *Life*, 206.
9. George P. Fedotov, *The Russian Religious Mind*, vol. 2, *The Middle Age: The Thirteenth to the Fifteenth Centuries* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966), 322.
10. Jostein Børtnes, *Visions of Glory: Studies in Early Russian Hagiography* (New Jersey: Humanities Press International, 1988), 31.
11. Efird, *Life*, 188.
12. Kallistos Ware, *The Inner Kingdom* (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2000), 169.
13. Andrei Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time: Reflections on the Cinema*, trans. Kitty Hunter-Blair (London: Bodley Head, 1986), 209.
14. Ibid., p. 38.
15. Robert Bird, *Andrei Rublev* (London: British Film Institute, 2004), 76.
16. Kovacs and Szilagyi, *Les Mondes*, 89.
17. Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time*, 34.
18. Paul Johnson, "Subjectivity and Sociality in the Films of Andrei Tarkovsky" in *Through the Mirror: Reflections on the Films of Andrei Tarkovsky*, ed. Gunnlaugur A. Jónsson and Thorkell Á. Óttarsson (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2006), 70.
19. Andrei Tarkovsky, "The Passion According to Andrei," Interview by Aleksandr Lipkov, accessed January 20, 2009, http://people.ucalgary.ca/~tstronds/nostalghia.com/TheTopics/PassionacctoAndrei.html
20. Fedotov, *The Russian*, 322.
21. Maya Turovskaya, *Tarkovsky: Cinema as Poetry* (London; Boston: *Faber and Faber*, 1989), 108.
22. Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time*, 209.
23. Andrei Tarkovsky, "*Tarkovsky at the Mirror*," Interview by Tonino Guerra, accessed January 5, 2009, http://www.ucalgary.ca/~tstronds/nostalghia.com/TheTopics/Tarkovsky_Guerra-1979.html
24. Rufus W. Mathewson, "The Soviet Hero and the Literary Heritage," *American Slavic and East European Review* 12 (1953): 508.
25. Andrei Tarkovsky, "To Journey Within," Interview by Gideon Bachmann, accessed January 20, 2009, http://www.ucalgary.ca/~tstronds/nostalghia.com/TheTopics/Gideon_Bachmann.html
26. Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time*, 205.
27. Kovacs and Szilagyi, *Les Mondes*, 154.

28. Sergei Nikolaevich Bulgakov, *The Orthodox Church* (Crestwood: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1988), 177.
29. Slavoj Žižek, "The Thing from Inner Space—On Tarkovsky," *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 4 (1999): 228.
30. Vida T. Johnson and Graham Petrie, *The Films of Andrei Tarkovsky: A Visual Fugue* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994), 225.
31. Peter Green, "Apocalypse and," *Sight and Sound* 56 (1987): 112.
32. Andrei Tarkovsky, "Red Tape," Interview by Angus MacKinnon (1984), in *Andrei Tarkovsky: Interviews*, ed. John Gianvito (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2006), 160.
33. Sergei A. Ivanov, *Holy Fools in Byzantium and Beyond* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 413.
34. Andrei Tarkovsky, *Time Within Time: The Diaries, 1970–1986* (Calcutta: Seagull, 1991), 16.
35. Kovacs and Szilagyi, *Les Mondes,* 157.
36. Jeremy Mark Robinson, *The Sacred Cinema of Andrei Tarkovsky* (Maidstone: Crescent Moon, 2007), 273.
37. Andrei Tarkovsky, "Andrei Tarkovsky on *The Sacrifice*," Interview by Annie Epelboin, accessed January 10, 2009, http://www.ucalgary.ca/~tstronds/nostalghia.com/TheTopics/On_Sacrifice.html
38. Ibid.
39. Tarkovsy, *Sculpting in Time*, 207.
40. Dennis Fletcher, *Praise of Folly* (Durham: University of Durham, 1981), 4.
41. Fedotov, *The Russian*, 317.
42. Tarkovsky, "Tarkovsky on *The Sacrifice*."
43. Svitlana Kobets, "The Subtext of Christian Asceticism and Alexander Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*," *The Slavic and East European Journal* 42 (1998): 662.
44. Nicolas Berdyaev, *The Origin of Russian Communism* (Ann Arbour: University of Michigan Press, 1960), 91.
45. Russell Bova, *Russia and Western Civilization: Cultural and Historical Encounters* (Armonk; London: M.E. Sharpe, 2003), 31.
46. Ewa Sutkowska, "Tarkovsky in London," accessed December 10, 2009, http://www.acs.ucalgary.ca/~tstronds/nostalghia.com/TheTopics/Tarkovsky_in_London.html
47. Tarkovsky, *Time Within Time,* 302.
48. Turovskaya, *Tarkovsky*, 109–110.
49. Andrei Tarkovsky, "Faith Is the Only Thing That Can Save Man," Interview by Charles H. Brantes in A*ndrei Tarkovsky: Interviews*, ed. John Gianvito (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2006.), 180.
50. Natasha Synessios, "From Wood to Marble: Tarkovsky's Journey to Ithaca" in *Tarkovsky*, ed. Nathan Dunne (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2008), 304.
51. Johnson and Petrie, *The Films*, *30*.
52. Andrei Tarkovsky, "A Talk with Tarkovsky" (1980), Interview by Gian Luigi Rondi, accessed January 20, 2009, http://people.ucalgary.ca/~tstronds/nostalghia.com/TheTopics/Tarkovsky_Rondi-1980.html
53. George Pattison, *Anxious Angels: A Retrospective View of Religious Existentialism* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 41.
54. Ibid., 24.
55. Markus Kleinert, "Auch ein höherer Wahnsinn Annäherungen an die Gestalt des Narren in Christo" in *Kierkegaard's Late Writings*, ed. Niels Jørgen Cappelørn, Hermann Deuser and K. Brian Söderquist (Berlin; New York: De Gruyter, 2010), 225–233.

56. Maria Turovskaya draws attention to the fact that the underlying principle of the construction of Tarkovsly's characters—weakness is strength—corresponds to Dostoevsky's prince Myshkin feebleness as another guise for spiritual resourcefulness, 97.
57. Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time*, 193.
58. Johnson and Petrie, *The Films*, 254; Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time*, 193.
59. Fedotov, *The Russian*, 321.
60. Ware, *The Inner*, 169.
61. Paul Evdokimov, *Pèlerins russes et vagabonds mystiques* (Paris: Cerf, 1987), 52.
62. Cited in Balint Andras Kovacs and Akos Szilagyi, *Les Mondes*, 159.
63. Jaroslav Pelikan, *Human Culture and the Holy: Essays on the Truth, the Good and the Beautiful* (London: SCM Press, 1959), 24.
64. Ibid., 17–18.
65. Ibid., 21–22.
66. Per Lønning, "Kierkegaard: A Stumbling-Block to 'Kierkegaardians': What Theological Orientation Would He Favour Today?" in *Kierkegaard Revisited: Proceedings From the Conference Kierkegaard and the Meaning of Meaning It*, ed. Niels Jorgen Coppelorn and Jon Bartley Stewart (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1997), 105.
67. George Pattison, *Dostoevsky and the Christian Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 237.
68. Andrei Tarkovsky, "Red tape," 153.
69. Turovskaya, *Tarkovsky*, 137.
70. Tarkovsky, "Faith Is the Only Thing That Can Save Man," 180.
71. Tarkovsky, "Tarkovsky on *The Sacrifice*."
72. Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1954), 67.
73. Tarkovsky, *Time Within Time*, 303.
74. Kovacs and Szilagyi, *Les Mondes*, 160.
75. Peter C. Christensen, "Kierkegaardian Motifs in Tarkovsky's *The Sacrifice*," *Soviet and East-European Drama, Theatre and Film* 7 (1987): 36.
76. I have discussed the 'knight of faith' in relation to holy foolishness in my first chapter.
77. Robert L Perkins, *Fear and Trembling, and Repetition* (Macon: Mercer, 1993), 119.
78. Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Fragments* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1941), 174.
79. Tarkovsky, "Tarkovsky on *The Sacrifice*."
80. Bhaskar Sarkar, "Threnody for Modernity" in *Tarkovsky*, ed. Nathan Dunne (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2008), 254.
81. Evdokimov, *Pèlerins*, 48.
82. Tarkovsky, "Tarkovsky on *The Sacrifice*."
83. Tarkovsky, "To Journey Within."

4 The Suffering Fool in French Cinema

> Jesus Christ has placed honour in suffering.
>
> Pascal, Letter XIV relating to the Jesuits, Paris, Oct. 23, 1656

A close-up of a doctor's face is visible as he breaks the grim news of an advanced case of tuberculosis. His face remains framed in close-up while an adamant female voice is heard insisting that he must be wrong every time he makes his case for a correct diagnosis. A medium length shot of his interlocutor reveals the still shape of a head and shoulders enveloped under a black veil. The doctor insists that the patient is given morphine for pain as the camera returns to focus on his face. The voice of the veiled woman is heard refusing adamantly: 'Carmelites are on the earth to suffer as our husband did'. The camera cuts back to the woman as she continues her theological argument: 'He's in agony till the world ends. For you, for me, for all our crimes', and returns to the doctor as he replies: 'Suffering is hideous'. The woman's voice is heard retorting: 'Not here'. This exchange between the Mother Superior and the doctor reveals the persistence of an ideal of suffering well into the nineteenth century and beyond. As in Alain Cavalier's *Thérèse*, from which this scene is taken, in this chapter the role of suffering will be a recurrent theme in our search for holy foolishness in French cinema.

If in Russian cinema holy fools are frequently represented as opponents of corruption and seekers of humiliation, in French cinema their portrayal reflects a rather different tradition. Encased within a Latin Christian understanding of folly, holy foolishness, when it is depicted, is usually marked by a pessimistic view of human nature and an emphasis on suffering, which, whether caused by others or self-inflicted, helps to shape the critical power that these fools are given. In order to explore the representation of the holy fool in French cinema it will first be necessary to examine the context for religious depictions of madness and folly. The dominant cultural models for holy fools in France, I will argue, originate in Roman Catholic theological discourse. After assessing the various theological and cultural strands that underpin the French cinematic holy fool, I will examine the critical

dimension of the fool figure based on the evidence provided by the films under discussion. The dominant note of holy foolishness in French cinema, it will be revealed, is to be found in the notions of love through suffering and sacrifice, either inflicted by others or self-inflicted.

FRENCH CATHOLICISM AND THE CINEMATIC HOLY FOOL

Unlike the Orthodox half of the Christian world, the Catholic Church has traditionally displayed very limited interest in promoting a clear-cut hagiographical model for the practice of holy foolishness as a distinct form of religious behaviour. Only relatively recently have Catholic theologians such as John Saward and Hans Urs von Balthasar considered holy fools as an important theological or literary category in their own right. To illustrate this point, it is worth noting that Hans Urs von Balthasar dedicates a chapter to folly and holy fools in his *The Glory of the Lord in Theological Aesthetics* (first published in German, 1969). For the purposes of this exploration it is important that he makes his remarks with application to the hagiography-based as well as the literary or fictional holy fool. He proposes an initial definition according to which the holy fool is 'the unprotected man, essentially transcendent, open to what is above him'.[1] Von Balthasar continues by adding a few more characteristics of the fool, distinguishing him as 'never quite "in his right mind", lacking the ponderousness that would tie him down to earth' and neither ascetic nor 'in any danger from purism or exclusiveness'. He then concedes in the general sense that even the saints who followed in the footsteps of Jesus could be regarded as fools.

Embarking on a quest for examples of holy folly in Western fiction, Von Balthasar dedicates different sections of his discussion to a very wide range of European literary figures, from Grimmelshausen's *Simplizissimus* and Cervantes's *Don Quixote* to Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*. Ultimately, the impression is that each of these protagonists offers different avenues of inquiry into holy foolishness and its possibilities of expression. His discussion of Wolfram of Eschenbach's *Parzival*, written between 1200–07, contains a few remarks pertinent to the present analysis. Von Balthasar introduces the idea of excess when he writes about Parzival's transformation from a natural fool into the King of the Grail using the idea of a transcendent folly which, having been first deficient, passes through full measure before becoming exaggerated.[2] Significantly, he finds that the principal notion underpinning Parzival's foolishness is that of simplicity: a concept defined as the 'heart's capacity manfully to withstand the world's contradictions'.[3] It is worth noting that most of the portrayals of cinematic holy fools in French cinema exhibit this characteristic. Similar to my suggestion in the first chapter that the illuminated idiot is the preferred variant of the holy fool in the West, von Balthasar contends that folly can take different forms and identifies a

genealogy from the Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite's *docta ignorantia* to Nicolas of Cusa's learned *idiota* and the tradition of the *illiterati* in Wolfram's time. However, von Balthasar argues, this kind of folly, closer to the mind rather than to the heart, has to imitate Christ in order to be the 'folly of the cross' that St Paul discusses in his Epistle to the Corinthians.[4]

Casting his investigation across European culture, von Balthasar's considerations have a degree of generality. Assuming that there is a degree of variation between expressions of Catholicism in different countries, where does this leave our search for a French model of holy foolishness? I would like to suggest that the French concept of holy foolishness is also shaped by a cultural model that became popularised in the West through medieval drama and the theology of Blaise Pascal (1623–62). A frequent theme in Western European medieval drama represents Jesus as a fool in front of Herod. For example, in the fifteenth century *Passion d'Arras* Herod orders that Jesus is dressed in the fool's white robe. Hence the fools come to represent 'ideal human beings in a religious sphere'.[5] What the image does symbolically is to associate a few ideas—faith, folly, and suffering—with the last of these implying not only physical torments but also moral—humiliation and ridicule. As faith is the starting point I will graft onto this medieval image a modern element: Pascal's wager. By so doing, I acknowledge the importance of the legacy of Pascal's thought for at least some of the cinematic works of religious tendency I will be considering in this chapter.

My two working propositions are illustrated by two films of Eric Rohmer (1920–2010): *Perceval* (1978) and *Ma nuit chez Maud* (*My Night at Maud's*) (1968). Rohmer's work is underpinned by a moral vision originating in his Catholic faith. He was also a reputable film theorist and *Perceval* was the applied result of his theory of enunciation, more precisely an illustration of the indirect discourse to which he was suggesting that cinematic art should return. The indirect discourse is similar to that used in literature where the author expresses himself without putting his words in the mouths of the characters.[6] Therefore, in *Perceval* Rohmer follows Chretien de Troyes's twelfth century romance of innocence, and brings on the screen one of the archetypal myths of Western civilization. It is primarily a spiritual quest in which human love is subordinate to divine love and through which the foolish and naïve hero preserves his innocence.[7] Rohmer was faithful not only to the text but to the epoch as well. The film has a striking visual resemblance with the iconographical conventions of the time, with stylized props and wooden castles. There is even a chorus of medieval singers commenting on the action in the passion play that concludes the film.

As something approaching a reproduction of Chretien de Troyes's romance, this film offers very few surprises apart from the unconventional style. One of them, however, is particularly revealing of the director's vision. What was in de Troyes a simple sentence: 'Thus Perceval learned how God was crucified and died on a Friday, and on Easter Day he received the communion' is extravagantly turned by Rohmer into an elaborate passion

play.[8] Perceval reenacts Jesus' life from his appearance in front of Pilate to the crucifixion. The summit of Perceval's spiritual initiation is thus an impersonation of the Divine Fool and sharing in His passions. This is a revelatory addition to the text and indicates the fact that neither Perceval's childish foolishness and innocence, nor his later initiation in chivalric practices, could replace the required level of self-sacrifice. Significantly, it points towards two recurrent motifs evident in the films reviewed here: self-sacrifice and suffering.

Rohmer's *My Night at Maud's* belongs to the cycle of six *Moral Tales* (*Contes moraux*) directed between 1962–72. These are variations on the theme of the man caught in a love triangle and faced with a moral decision. The tales are not moral in the strict sense of traditional Christian morality but present us with the workings of an ethical consciousness. *My Night at Maud's* is a meditation on Pascal's wager and its implications. Jean-Luis is an introverted bourgeois Catholic who is introduced by his Marxist friend Vidal to a beautiful divorcee, Maud. They discuss Pascal over dinner in Maud's flat. Jean-Luis is a believer, a Catholic, of which he seems very proud, but he cannot understand why he would give up a thing that he enjoys, such as the Chanturge wine they are drinking: 'Why give it up? In the name of what? No, what I don't like in the wager is the idea of giving in exchange, of buying a ticket like a lottery'. He then explains the nature of his faith, suggesting that what counts is less deeds but rather the purity of the heart. Vidal leaves and by morning Jean-Luis gets very close to becoming unfaithful with Maud, and rejecting his ideal mate—a Catholic girl that he had only met recently at church.

The film introduces a discussion about what is at stake in Pascal's wager. Simply stated, since reason is incapable of definitively uncovering whether there is God or not, the best we can do is to weigh the loss and the gain from wagering that God exists. If we gain, we gain all, if we lose, we lose nothing. Kierkegaard comes to a similar conclusion over the impossibility of demonstrating God's existence and of the choice one has to make. The important difference is that Pascal wants to minimize all risks through choice, whereas for Kierkegaard the choice itself implies a risk. But what is of interest here is the idea of choice and what it implies. The wager refers *stricto sensu* to admitting the existence of God, but not necessarily to faith. That is why Pascal considered it necessary that the wager should be followed by control over our passions so that grace is also attracted.[9] In other words, the intellectual assent should be doubled by an existential commitment. What actually leads to faith is not so much reasonableness but the foolishness implied in the Cross:

> Our religion is wise and foolish: wise, because it is the most learned and most strongly based on miracles, prophecies, etc., foolish, because it is not all this which makes people belong to it. This is a good enough reason for condemning those who do not belong, but not for making those

> who do belong believe. What makes them believe is the Cross. Lest the Cross of Christ should be made of none effect.[10]

Returning to Rohmer's Jean-Louis, we realize that behind his continuous introspections and rationalizations lies the rejection of the Cross as self-sacrifice: 'Take me: with all my mediocrity, my careful middle-of-the-roadism, my lukewarmism—all of which God despises, I know—I can still attain a kind of . . . fulfillment'. It is difficult to imagine that Rohmer could have developed a better definition of the precise opposite of what a holy fool stands for in Pascal's thought.

For a theoretical formulation of this argument it is helpful to turn to the philosopher Gilles Deleuze. In *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image* (1983) Deleuze dedicates a section to the relation between philosophy and cinema by tracing a line of inspiration from Kierkegaard to Dreyer and Pascal to Bresson in what he terms as the 'consciousness of choice as steadfast spiritual determination' and the mode of existence it entails.[11] Deleuze's insights into the nature of the spiritual choice can also illuminate the spiritual commitment of the holy fool. This is because the holy fool can be seen as an intensified expression of the person of faith who chooses to serve God, and by doing so understands that resurrection and the crucifixion are existentially interrelated in religious life. Even if it is not stated explicitly here, it can be easily inferred that Deleuze also assumes a line of inspiration that can be traced from Pascal to Kierkegaard. In spite of the two centuries separating them and their different philosophical and theological backgrounds, affinities between the two thinkers can be established on a number of different levels. These range from the general—both fought against the 'spirit of the age' and what they saw as the perversion of Christianity—to the particular—the concrete way in which they conceived of Christian existence.[12] However, Deleuze is only interested in showing what is at stake in Pascal's wager and Kierkegaard's leap of faith. He interprets the wager not as a choice between terms but as a choice between modes of existence:

> This is all that Pascal's wager says: the alternation of terms is indeed the affirmation of the existence of God, its negation, and its suspension (doubt, uncertainty); but the spiritual alternative is elsewhere: it is between the mode of existence of him who 'wagers' that God exists and the mode of existence of him who wagers for non-existence or who does not want to wager.[13]

Pascal's formulation is useful in encouraging us to think more deeply about character types, and how they affect understandings of divine folly. Four types of respondents to the wager are suggested: the devout character, a man of virtue and a guardian of order for whom there is no question of choosing; the skeptic, a person of uncertainty who does not know how or what to choose; the creatures of evil who lose their freedom of choice by following

evil; and finally the person of faith who makes an authentic choice or has the consciousness of choice (embodied as I will show in Bresson's *Joan of Arc* and the country priest). The character of true choice is discovered, most importantly, through a form of sacrifice.[14]

Suffering and sacrifice will run like a red thread through the cinematic narratives on which we will embark in this chapter and the next. In the majority of the films the visual level complements the narrative in order to accentuate the foolish figure's physical suffering. I would like to suggest that French cinema, particularly in those films where religious themes have been depicted, has been, like other fields of culture, influenced by a historical discourse about sacrifice. Sometimes this has supported (and at other times opposed) the virtues of a sacrificial vision promoted in religious literature, but this is a debate which has preoccupied French culture at large, with cinema being no exception.

At the core of this discourse have been key elements of Roman Catholic theology. Sacrifice, whether of Christ or his followers, has been the cornerstone of the Christian proclamation from the very beginning, but it acquired a specific importance in modern French history, arguably unparalleled in other European Catholic countries. Ivan Strenski points out that in France sacrifice has been understood by both theologians and religious folk as an ideal opposed to the prudent and calculated 'giving' evident in bourgeois morality. Instead, sacrifice is interpreted as 'a total annihilating surrender of the self, a complete "giving up" of oneself' in order to achieve expiation for sin.[15] He identifies four historical phases to the development of this concept, each era generating its own reinterpretation of the sacrificial ideal. The 'baroque' phase was a period of reaction to the hugely disruptive effects of the Reformation and the Wars of Religion in sixteenth and early seventeenth century France. It was provoked by the Protestant denial of the Eucharist as sacrifice against which *L'école française de spiritualité* led by Pierre Bérulle (1575–1629) offered a robust critique, affirming sacrifice as the total annihilation of a victim and an expiation for sin. The spirituality promoted by the School was influenced by a pessimistic Augustinian vision of fallen human nature.[16] In the 'rococo' phase that followed during the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the ideal of sacrificial spirituality was exemplified by the Jesuit devotion to the Sacred Heart, usually depicted as a wounded, bleeding heart, crowned by thorns. The third phase of 'restoration' spirituality following the French Revolution was dominated by the radical thought of counter-Enlightenment philosopher Joseph de Maistre (1755–1821), especially in the politicised character of his meditations on sacrifice and nation. Finally, the fourth intransigent/integrist period from the first third of the nineteenth century to the early twentieth century, Strenski argues, was characterized by a dogmatism reaffirming the teachings of the Council of Trent (1545–63), with the political right adopting de Maistre's ideas in their fight against liberalism.[17]

Joseph de Maistre's depiction of suffering has proved immensely influential in modern French culture. He reinterpreted the traditional doctrine of redemptive suffering so that it was appropriate to the French historical context. To begin, the Christian has the obligation to sacrifice himself or herself, even physically if necessary, thus participating in Christ's suffering on the cross. Derived from this was an emphasis on the doctrine of vicarious suffering. Its origin was in St Paul's *Epistle to the Colossians* (1:24): '. . . now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church'. Therefore, by suffering, the Christian not only participates in but also completes Christ's suffering on the cross.[18] In de Maistre the doctrine was a direct answer to the contemporary historical turmoil the nation was experiencing. The executions of anointed monarchs, aristocrats, clerics and other royalist supporters that followed the French Revolution became in de Maistre's language 'martyrdoms' which renewed Christ's sacrifice on the cross and had the potential to save the entire French nation.[19] This politicisation of an originally religious idea opened the door for future reinterpretations, not necessarily religious, in which the individual could be sacrificed for the benefit of the common good.

This discourse on sacrifice has influenced generations of Catholic as well as non-Catholic French writers in different forms and to different extent. One such writer is Bernanos on whose works three of the films analyzed in this chapter and the next are based: Pialat's *Under the Sun of Satan* and Bresson's *Diary of a Country Priest*, *Mouchette*. One might add that the recurrent images of blood that appear in modern French literature and cinema can be associated with the influence of de Maistre's idea of 'salvation through blood' in which personal sacrifice, including the shedding of blood, combines with the sacramental presence of Christ's body and blood in the Eucharist.[20]

THREE FRENCH PORTRAYALS OF FOLLY

Generally speaking, French cinema has not been more inclined than others to explore religious themes and for four decades, between 1940 and 1970, its remarkable achievements in this area were chiefly due to the towering presence of director Robert Bresson, who will receive special attention in my next chapter. However, French cinema in the 1980s underwent something of a renaissance in the number of films exploring religious themes. Many of these focused on the ideal of a suffering figure, foolish and saintly, standing at odds with the world. A cursory list of examples includes: Edouard Niermans's *Anthracite*, about a young priest's failed efforts to breath love into the educational methods of a Jesuit college; Alain Resnais' *Love unto Death*, a metaphysical meditation on life, love and death occasioned by a character's near-death experience; Jean-Luc Godard's *Hail Mary* (1985), a

modernist controversial version of the biblical story of Mary and Joseph; Alain Cavalier's *Thérèse* (1986); Maurice Pialat's *Under the Sun of Satan* (1987); Jean Delannoy's *Bernadette* (1988) and the sequence *Bernadette's Passion* (1989) about the Catholic visionary of Lourdes. *Thérèse* and *Under the Sun of Satan* offer two particularly striking and contrasting portrayals of folly: one luminous and belonging to a nun who was shortly canonized after her death and one more darkly flavoured, through a priest of controversial sanctity. As if to offer a more comprehensive picture, more recently, in 2008, the figure of a lay woman, an epitome of forbearance and long-suffering, enjoyed the light of the screen in Marion Laine's *A Simple Heart*. An analysis of these films will demonstrate the continuing significance of suffering folly as a key theme in the modern French cinematic world after Bresson.

THÉRÈSE (1986)

St Thérèse de Lisieux is known for advocating the 'little way'—the daily, laborious, apparently unheroic way of serving God in humility and love. Alain Cavalier's film pays homage to her spiritual method by showing that great passion can be expressed in a very simple way, with a minimal story and a minimalist décor. The director focuses mainly on two moments in Thérèse's life: her passionate attempts to enter the Carmelite convent—being underage she has to go as far as approaching the Pope to ask for a dispensation—and the harrowing last months of her life, afflicted with tuberculosis.

According to the director, liturgical ceremonies are deliberately avoided in the film, so that instead the simplicity and the poverty of the Carmelite lifestyle would come to the fore.[21] Nevertheless, Cavalier retains an important ceremonial scene that he presents for its symbolical power. When Thérèse enters the convent she is wearing a white wedding dress as a symbol of her becoming a bride of Christ. Then, in the convent, the nuns repeatedly recite the *Song of Songs* as an expression of their love for Christ, their bridegroom. Thérèse is a champion of this impetuous love, describing her relation with Christ in concrete human terms and advising one of the sisters to 'Fondle him. That's how I snared him.' Although we are not given a great deal of access to the routines of spiritual life in the convent, except for various penitential practices, we are nevertheless offered a window into the daily menial tasks of the nuns. Their inner life goes on unseen, hidden under the ordinariness of visible and corporeal reality.

The film is far from being an exaltation of suffering but it remains faithful to the biography of its protagonist. Thérèse's physical sufferings, much of the time self-inflicted, are recorded with a neutral tone. When she is still at home, she prays intensely for a convict awaiting his execution, and abstains from drinking water as a sacrificial offering for him, only to discover the following day that he has repented. In the convent she sleeps without a mattress or blanket and occasionally the camera discreetly captures traces

Figure 4.1 Thérèse posing as Joan of Arc for her sister. (*Thérèse*)

of the austerities imposed on her body: bandaged hands, drops of blood on her lips. When she is dying, she gathers all her strength to rise from bed and limp painfully around her room as an offering on behalf of one of the sisters who was escaping from the monastery. This 'sacrificial asceticism', as Theresa Sanders calls it, is replaced in the last months of Thérèse's life by the suffering caused by her tuberculosis, which she accepts with joy as a form of sharing in Christ's passion.[22] As one of her sisters remarks: 'Suffering is the key', though she embraces it as a form of love rather than penance.

The foolishness of such a life of renunciation and privation is assumed by Cavalier. When Thérèse's father loses his mind as a result of her entering the convent, Céline, the only sister out of four who has not (yet) become a nun, accuses the others of selfishness and folly. While her sisters are quick to deny this charge, Thérèse enthusiastically admits: 'Yes, we are foolish'. The extreme ascetical practices to which Thérèse submits may be said to 'border on madness' but can be better understood as an act of love in the light of this holy foolishness.[23] The wise bridesmaids from Christ's parable, with whom the Carmelite sisters identify, are, paradoxically, foolish.

UNDER THE SUN OF SATAN (1987)

By contrast, Maurice Pialat's *Under the Sun of Satan* gives expression to a very different vision of folly in spite of sharing the same practices of sacrificial asceticism. The film is based on the homonymous novel of Georges

Bernanos (1888–1948). Donissan is a young priest who appears awkward and lacking in manners: habits which disconcert the parishioners of Campagne. He seems to have doubts about living up to his vocation and attempts to compensate for this through excessive mortifications of the flesh. This objective is met by wearing a coarse hair shirt under his cassock, self-flagellation or walking for many miles instead of making use of available transport. Later in the film we discover that he offers his bodily sufferings as a means of saving souls possessed by sin: 'So many souls possessed by sin. That enraged me. To save them, I offered all I had. My life, first; it's not much. My salvation, if God wants it'. Still, this belief drives Donissan to despair, especially when he begins to believe that the world is under the sway of the Devil, in spite of his fervent faith and preoccupation with the salvation of the others.

The young priest reaches this conclusion by precipitating the suicide of Mouchette, a young woman of easy virtue who has murdered one of her lovers and whose deed and inner torments are revealed to the priest through a form of supernatural intervention. As part of Donissan's attempts to save Mouchette, he confronts her with the worthlessness of her vicious life, the unoriginality of her sin and the loss of freedom that comes with it: a discovery which has a shattering rather than a redemptive effect. The origin of his spiritual gifts remains ambiguous as they appear to follow from a personal encounter with Satan, who promises never to give Donissan peace. Satan appears in various guises, such as a horse dealer tempting Donissan by offering self-knowledge beyond his existing powers of introspection. In spite of avoiding this temptation, Donissan is promised the gift to 'see others as you saw himself'. Pialat hints at the possibility that this encounter was merely a play of Donissan's imagination as a result of his physical exhaustion. Nonetheless, the encounter is believed to be very real by the priest. When his attempts to save Mouchette's soul fails, Donissan's priestly abilities are brought into question and he is sent to a Trappist monastery for a time before being given charge of a smaller parish.

Even if at the end of the film we are given a hint that Donissan may actually be a saint, the ambiguity cultivated by Pialat leaves the viewer troubled and divided over his true spiritual merits. Given his reputation as a miracle worker, he is called to heal a boy from a neighbouring parish hit by meningitis. After he arrives too late, Donissan, moved by the anguish of the mother and at the urging of the parish priest, tries to resurrect the boy. Lifting the boy in his arms he calls upon God to show who is more powerful. The boy opens briefly his eyes, only to throw the priest into repentance at the thought of having doubted God's power. His foolishness is to be a zealous soldier of God even if believing that God has lost the battle in a world totally engulfed by evil. Troubled, he returns to his church, only to be found dead in the confessional by his superior, Menou-Segrais. His serene face is lit by a sunbeam, indicating that he is at last at peace. Whether the mortifying of his body or the working of miracles are signs of sanctity is left unclear,

Figure 4.2 Donissan trying to bring back to life a dead child. (*Under the Sun of Satan*)

but his serene face suggests that he has won his final battle with evil: a conflict carried out mainly through the torture of the body. While Mouchette demonstrates the body as an instrument of perdition, for Donissan it is one of redemption.[24]

Pialat explores the idea of foolishness in a world where 'people are looking only for the agreeable and the useful' and where 'there is nothing for the saint, who is derided as a madman', as Menou-Segrais says. In spite of his unorthodox theology and troubled soul, Donissan is animated by an unquenched desire to serve God and his fellow humans, even if he doubts God's omnipotence and believes, along Jansenist lines, that evil has overcome people to the extent that they are no longer accountable for their deeds.[25] This suspension between two worlds is rendered visually by the alternation of light and darkness, suggestive of divine illumination and evil's insidious presence, such as in the scene that follows the miracle.[26] Here, overwhelmed by repentance, Donissan is walking in the light, but falls onto his knees and enters a spot of shadow before returning into the light again. Rather than condemned for his dealings with the world of shadows, Donissan appears to be marked for an exceptional and unusual destiny. One sequence is revelatory for the way in which Pialat sets him apart from the ordinary. In a dolly shot we see him plodding along the main road in the rain to the neighbouring parish of Etaples where his mentor has sent for him, while farm wagons pulled by horses pass him by. The camera then cuts to the next shot in which he is seen walking towards and then following a

narrow path off the road, escaping from the business of the world. Finally, we see Donissan trudging up and down the hills in total solitude—an image of the loneliness and singularity of his life's journey in a world that follows the broad road.

A SIMPLE HEART (2008)

If Thérèse and Donissan are confident that they can 'trade' their suffering for the salvation of their fellow beings, Marion Laine's protagonist in her free adaptation of Flaubert's short story *A Simple Heart* is found at the opposite pole. A devoted maid in the house of the widow Madame Aubain, the rather simple-minded Félicité is a picture of love and humbleness, unaware of her professional and human qualities. Her relation with God is rather instinctual and never rationalized. She lacks any education that would allow her to formulate clear ideas about God and her utter humility deters her from presuming that she has any merits at all. 'Poor' Félicité, as her mistress calls her with reference to her feeble mind, is not even aware whether she was ever baptized. For this reason she cannot participate in the sacramental life of the church in a formal way, but she emphatically transposes herself in the place of her mistress' daughter when she receives her first communion. Her faith, like all her actions, is not filtered by the mind but springs directly from the heart, in a way that comes very close to Pascal's description of faith in his *pensée* 277: 'The heart has reasons of which the reason knows nothing. It is the heart which perceives God and not the reason. That's what faith is: God perceived by the heart, not by reason'.[27]

Madame Aubain offers a counterpoint to Félicité. A wealthy and educated lady, she is calculated and restrained in her affections towards her two children, Clémence and Paul. While Aubain is a cerebral woman, Félicité is quite the opposite, pouring her affection first on Clémence and, after the latter leaves home for a boarding school, on her nephew Victor. She does not hesitate to put her life in danger to protect her mistress and her children from an enraged bull: an event that leaves her lame, but fails to attract any gratitude or compassion. When she hears that Clémence is seriously ill at the boarding school, she clings onto the back of a carriage only to arrive there scarred and frozen. While showing inner fortitude, on the outside Félicité is content with a state of indistinctiveness, most of the time wearing an old dress resembling the colour of red soil. The exceptions are only when she changes her usual outfit for black mourning clothes, following the deaths of Clémence and Victor, and later when she clothes herself in white.

Félicité's dressing in white coincides with her descent into folly, after she repeatedly suffers painful losses: first, the people for whom she cared, followed by her parrot that reminded her of her nephew, her hearing and finally her mistress. Two significant episodes draw the film to a close and propose that she is not only a long-suffering servant but also a paradoxical

figure of sanctity. One day when Madame Aubain returns home, she finds an aged Félicité wearing a white dress and saying that she will take part in the procession of the virgins for confirmation. Her employer reminds her she no longer has the age or the moral purity to join the procession. After the death of Madame Aubain, a final episode shows an agonising Félicité suffering from pneumonia in the attic of the house where she has spent most of her life. She is lying in bed, wearing a white dress with a wreath of withered flowers on her head. The procession of the virgins going for confirmation is passing under her window and the woman visiting her remarks that it was a funny idea for her to participate in the procession. Nevertheless, her foolish desire reveals the actual truth: both her mind and body have been preserved unblemished, in spite of a short-lived relationship with a man in her youth. Her life has been dedicated entirely to serving and loving others while totally disregarding herself, which renders her most deserving of being one of the virgin brides of Christ.

Departing from Flaubert's text, which is rather more ambiguous, Marion Laine projects Félicité as a so-called 'idiot' who nonetheless proves to be a visionary in providing a lesson in humanity.[28] While the Flaubertian 'perroquet gigantesque' appears as the last image of the film (and is presumably the image Félicité sees in the moment of her death), it is no longer a sign of her incapacity to picture the new world. Referencing an earlier episode in which the priest told the story of St Francis of Assisi and his birds taking prayers to heaven, the parrot is transformed into an apparition of a psychopomp, arriving to escort her ascending soul.

In these films the need for suffering in order to achieve redemption in an uncaring world is heavily emphasized. In *Under the Sun of Satan* it is

Figure 4.3 Félicité on her death bed, hearing the virgins' cortege passing. (*A Simple Heart*)

forcefully revealed through Donissan's bodily mortifications. Cavalier, though not a believer himself, in his film *Thérèse* cannot avoid illustrating the way in which suffering becomes meaningful in the experience of the saint he portrays. Marion Laine, by freely adapting Flaubert, accentuates what he plays down—the physical pains that Félicité accepts without complaint. In these films the idea of suffering emerges as the key attribute that helps to combine the sense of the divine and the problem of foolishness. It is, therefore, through the holy fool as a suffering agent that we see the critical dimension of the figure emerge in modern French cinema.

The critical power of this representation of the holy fool is striking. In most of the cinematic accounts we have explored the holy fool appears as a sufferer sacrificed on the altar of his love for the Other or for others; love here being displayed not only as affection but also as the will to act in the interest of one's neighbour. His/her function as a critic is manifest principally in the religious sphere, and it is from this perspective that the world appears deficient and lacking in moral virtue. Pialat's *Under the Sun of Satan* depicts a world seen by Donissan as enchained by sin and beyond salvation were it not for the redeeming intervention of those who take on suffering but are seen by the world as fools. Similarly, in Laine's *A Simple Heart* Félicité is the perfect vehicle for critiquing a society incapable of understanding pure goodness and which takes advantage of the vulnerability of the meek and those who sacrifice themselves. In the same way that the coming of light into the world condemns a society where darkness is preferred (Jn. 3:19), the suffering of the holy fool is an indirect criticism of a society which has lost faith and a mode of being predicated on Christian self-sacrifice. This is manifested in two directions: first, suffering highlights and critiques the public's hostility, insensitivity and lack of understanding in relation to the person of faith; for this reason the perpetrator—an individual or a community—is condemned. Second, suffering is assumed, if not invited, as an offering by the person of faith for the salvation of those who have lost themselves spiritually or otherwise. It is in the latter form that Christ is taken as a model of forbearance and suffering for the salvation of humankind.

NOTES

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11. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image* (Continuum: London and New York, 2008), 118.
12. A detailed comparison can be found in *Pascal and Kierkegaard: A Study in the Strategy of Evangelism*, II, Denzil G.M. Patrick (London; Redhill: Lutterworth, 1947).
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15. Ivan Strenski, *Contesting Sacrifice: Religion, Nationalism, and Social Thought in France* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 4.
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23. Jean-Michel Frodon, "Thérèse" in *The Hidden God: Film and Faith*, ed. Mary Lea Bandy and Antonio Monda (New York: Museum of Modern Art; London: Thames & Hudson, 2003), 175.
24. André Frossard interviewed by Pierre-André Boutang, "De Bernanos à Pialat," directed by Jean-Marie Carzou, 1987.
25. Sanders, *Celluloid Saints*, 67.
26. Marja Warehime, *Maurice Pialat* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), 138–139.
27. Pascal, *Pensées*, 277.
28. Marion Laine, "Entretien avec Marion Laine," accessed November 22, 2011, http://medias.unifrance.org/medias/96/128/32864/presse/dossier-de-presse.pdf

5 The Bressonian Holy Fool

> But and if ye suffer for righteousness' sake, happy are ye: and be not afraid of their terror, neither be troubled. (1 Peter 3:14)

A group of young men ask a lady in mourning to lend her donkey for a day job. She objects, pleading with them to leave the creature alone, since he has laboured enough and is now old and 'a saint'. That her wish is ignored becomes immediately evident: In a tight succession of concentrated shots we see the donkey enjoying the dignified state of carrying holy relics on his back in a religious procession, then desperately braying for help not to be stolen from his mistress's stables, and ultimately suffering the humiliation of being forced, through beating and kicking, to carry contraband goods. If, in the procession scene, the donkey is filmed from such an angle to create the impression that the incense cast by the altar boys is destined to honour him, in the contraband scene the camera cuts to the young men's hands ominously grabbing the staves used to beat the creature. After climbing a peak burdened with a sack of goods hanging from his sides like two embracing arms of a cross, the donkey is accidently wounded by a bullet and blood is shown dripping from the injury in close-up. Freed from his tormentors, he dies peacefully, surrounded by grazing sheep. Never has an unreasonable creature suggested so tellingly a Christ-like figure as Robert Bresson's Balthazar and never has cinema seen such an ingenious symbol for holy foolishness, masterfully wedding unreason and long-suffering. Of all French directors, Robert Bresson (1901–99) perhaps paid the greatest attention to the spiritual dimension of folly and he used the fool figure to an extent arguably unmatched. The Bressonian characters who lend themselves to interpretation as holy fools will be explored in this chapter as part of an argument that they gradually evolved from Catholic-inspired models towards non-traditional forms.

What distinguishes the Bressonian holy fool from the other characters we have been exploring? It is not easy to draw a psychological profile of the Bressonian holy fool. Bresson deliberately preserves the mystery of the human being by eluding psychological explanations: 'No psychology (of the

kind which discovers only what it can explain)' he writes in his *Notes on the Cinematographer*.[1] For this reason Bresson avoids using professional actors but prefers persons totally untrained in the art of acting whom he calls models (with the exception of his first three films). What he demands from them is not acting but a kind of automatism. The meaning that is intended emerges later during the process of editing, whereby the cinematic images are treated as words that when joined properly will form comprehensible sentences. What we capture from these portrayals is, therefore, what André Bazin calls their 'physiology of existence', which leaves the religious motivations unexplained, showing only the working of divine grace.[2]

René Predal defines Bresson's characters as either 'madmen of God'—the religious protagonists—or 'tormented rebels', referring to all others.[3] While his assertion should not be generalized to all characters, it is a very useful tool to describe a marked tendency in the Bressonian portrait gallery, since it captures an essential feature most of them share: passion. They are presented from the very beginning as being possessed by their passions. This brings to mind the way Dostoevsky despised 'lukewarm' characters (following their condemnation in Revelation 3:16) who, in his work, tend to belong to an unredeemable category, incapable of spiritual regeneration, precisely because of their half-heartedness. All the other features of the character derive from this primary motivation: Intransigence and a strong will are necessary in order to pursue their passions.[4] However, these are not by themselves sufficient, and in Bresson's early films at least, human passion is met halfway by divine grace. Thus, attaining one's own vocation is a combination of three factors: will, freedom and grace.[5] There is, however, a price to pay in the case of the religiously driven characters, since their passion is translated into suffering.

If we turn to the particular category of the 'madmen of God', what Bresson's viewer can access is 'the forms of their spiritual action'.[6] Their reasons are not disclosed by Bresson and are not subject to psychological laws. In fact, such characters defy common sense. Joan of Arc is governed by the voices she hears, and she refuses to save herself, while Bresson's country priest has moments of clairvoyance which remain beyond our comprehension, and it would be impossible to find a character more opaque than the donkey Balthasar. Their peculiarity triggers their solitude and pits them against the community of society. They challenge norms involuntarily, as a result of their very existence, and in spite of their apparent weaknesses. Weakness is for Bresson, as it is also for Tarkovsky, an important characteristic. It alludes to the "power of weakness" expounded as a virtue in the New Testament.[7] At the same time these characters are depicted as suffering innocents, imitating Christ in His passion. Their suffering is apparent less through the mind than via the body—a body which is imprisoned, beaten and consumed by illness. Their passion as religious fervor is, therefore, translated into the more concrete terms of passion as suffering. In order to explore Bresson's particular representation of the holy fool, we need to closely examine his depiction of them in his filmography.

DIARY OF A COUNTRY PRIEST (1951)

It is telling that Bresson paid a great deal of attention to religious figures throughout his directing career. Bresson's third feature film, the *Diary of a Country Priest* (1951) is a faithful adaptation of the homonymous novel of Georges Bernanos, a Catholic writer whom Hans Urs von Balthasar significantly considers to be a spiritual 'descendant of Pascal and Kierkegaard'.[8] It is here that we encounter the first of Bresson's recognizably holy fool figures. The diary format of the novel is transposed onto the screen through the actual presence of a hand writing and also a voiceover—representing the consciousness of the priest—working as an organizing principle and a commentary for both the writing and the action. In the first sequence of the film the voiceover announces the intention to jot down 'the very simple trivial secrets of a very ordinary kind of life'. Yet by the end of the film we realize that such a comment cannot do justice to the human life recorded by the diary even if the voice was speaking in total honesty, so deep is the humility of its owner. What we gain access to, therefore, is not the psychology of the character, but the life of the spirit in the presence of grace. It is for this reason that Bazin credits Bresson with the creation of a new dramatic form that is specifically theological: a phenomenology of salvation and grace.[9]

The priest is immediately introduced after the opening diary sequence. A sign for a place called Ambricourt fades to leave in full close-up the tired and melancholy face of the curé as he is wiping his forehead. A medium shot taken from behind a forged steel gate informs the viewer he is taking a rest next to his bike in front of his new parish church. It is followed by a cut to a close-up of a man and a woman embracing in the garden on the other side of the fence; they notice the priest and turn their backs towards him, heading for the mansion in the distance. The priest is left alone: there is nobody else to welcome him. This scene is revealing for his drama which will unfold in the solitude of his conscience. Shortly afterwards, he meets another priest from Torcy—his spiritual mentor–with whom he will have a few other encounters in future. We see the priest feeding himself on bread and wine, the only nourishment he can have as a result of what appears to be a stomach condition. As the action moves to his ministry, he is shown after the catechism class, where he wishes to reward the student Seraphita for her diligence, only to be told what lovely eyes he has while the other girls are giggling behind the door. Seraphita continues her defiance in future episodes. Meanwhile, at night he is tortured by stomach pains and the feeling that God has deserted him; as a result he can hardly pray. Chantal, the count's daughter, visits him to denounce the governess's affair with her father, and the priest, in a moment of clairvoyance, asks her for what we suspect is a suicide note.

The most dramatic episode of the film follows, in which he meets the countess who has stopped taking any interest in the world since the death of her infant boy. Her relationship with her husband and daughter has been

Figure 5.1 The priest of Ambricourt wrestling for the soul of the countess. (*The Diary of a Country Priest*)

transformed into one of indifference. The priest wrestles for her soul and she manages to find peace. The next morning the priest hears the news of her death. Chantal, who has overheard the conversation, cast doubts over his involvement. His health deteriorates even more but he tenaciously attends to his daily duties. One night he falls in the mud while walking in the forest, though not before having visions of the Virgin and the holy Infant. When he comes round, Seraphita is attending to him. The next day he decides to leave and see a doctor. Chantal's cousin, Oliver, an officer in the foreign legion, gives him a ride on his motorbike to the station, which for him turns into an exhilarating experience. On the same day he finds out that he is suffering from stomach cancer and decides to visit a friend from the seminary, Louis Dufrety, who has renounced his priesthood. The priest dies, but not before trying to make him reconsider his decision. From the letter Dufrety sends to the priest from Torcy we find out his last words were 'All is grace'.

Bazin compares the film to a medieval Passion Play or the Way of the Cross, each sequence in the film being a station along the road.[10] The comparison is not only invited by the cross that fills the screen in the final sequence, but is clearly suggested by the priest's realization that his place in Christ's drama is in the garden of olives: 'The truth is that my place for all

time has been the garden of olives. Suddenly our Lord has granted me the grace of letting me know, through the words of my old teacher . . . that I was the prisoner of the Holy Passion'. Through his physical and emotional suffering in the service of his parishioners, the country priest participates in Christ's Passion. Hans Urs von Balthasar makes an observation about Bernanos's protagonist which is as valid for Bresson's:

> It is obvious that these two kinds of anguish cannot be distinguished in the experience itself. For, who would venture to pinpoint the place where personal human suffering passes over into universal human suffering conditioned by original sin, where the latter then passes over into the universally vicarious suffering of the Cross, and finally where this all-encompassing suffering of Christ is communicated to the individual "member" of Christ as personally experienced anguished, to the precise degree pleasing to grace?[11]

As a result, even if what the priest experiences are events strictly related to his daily life, they parallel the biblical narrative of the Passion in a mysterious way, reminding us of Pascal's maxim 'Everything happens through mystery', a quote that appeared in Bresson's first feature film *Angels of Sin* (1943). Some illustrations here will help to make the point. The bread and wine to which the priest's diet is reduced are signs of his sacramental existence—his whole life becomes a communion with Christ. He not only celebrates Mass in a church as a function of his ordination, but on a private level he offers his entire being as an oblation. In retrospect the 'trivial' events in his 'ordinary' life are transfigured into something far higher. He is indeed subject to an invisible trial by the community and condemned with undeserved and unexplainable hostility as a useless creature and a drunkard. Mentally and physically exhausted, the priest falls in the mud like Christ under the weight of the cross. The cloth that Seraphita uses to wipe his face resembles the veil of Veronica. He experiences God's desertion and is left struggling even to pray. The priest's vomiting of blood, caused by his illness, offers another point of resemblance, this time to Christ's bleeding on the cross. Finally, the priest shares in the divine drama even to the point that he is made to resemble a fool in the eyes of his parishioners. The motive of foolishness and ridicule is recurrent: He is treated with impertinence by Seraphita, which provokes the laughter of the other girls; the count calls him a fool for trying to warn him about his daughter's sadness; he is criticized by the curé of Torcy for his ridiculous appearance; and he suspects people might have put something in his drink just to laugh at him. If the curé of Torcy represents the 'devout voice of common sense', or the embodiment of respectability, the curé of Ambricourt stands for the foolishness of sacrifice.[12]

The curé of Ambricourt reunites in himself most of the characteristics associated with holy fools: marginality, mortification of the body,

child-likeness, a combination of weakness and strength and the gift of clairvoyance. His marginalization is caused by a threefold alienation: first, from his body, triggered by sickness and unconscious mortification of the body through scarce nourishment and lack of rest; second, from society—he is considered useless and inept due to his lack of social skills; and thirdly, from sin—he leads un unsuspected life of religious devotion.[13] This privation is compensated in the spiritual order of things by the gift of clairvoyance and visions. His child-like purity is guessed by the countess who mentions it in the letter addressed to him, and Oliver recognizes in his apparent weakness the tenacity of a legionnaire: 'You could have been one of us', he exclaims coldly. And indeed his determination to carry on all his priestly duties in spite of the continuous deterioration of his health testifies to this point. The same tenacity and dedication to the life of the spirit was developed with even greater rigour in the next religious figure Bresson depicted as a protagonist in his films: Joan of Arc.

The hostility that the curé of Ambricourt encounters stems from the loss of sacrificial love that people have towards each other. The parishioners are cold and hostile to the curé's simplicity, as pointed out by the count's uncle: 'People don't hate your simplicity—they shield themselves from it. It's like a flame that burns them'. Likewise, the countess in the film is enclosed in her pain for the loss of a child and fails to provide the wifely and motherly love while the other members of the family falter in their love towards her. The very presence of the priest as an innocent victim reveals the evils of this community which has lost the sense of communion and whose members are turned against each other. As the priest points out in the conversation with Olivier, the parishioners' world is different from his because 'it lacks love'. Moreover, the curé's world differs from the sacrificial ethos of the legionnaires because it stands for 'a justice without honour', of the kind disclosed in Isaiah's 'suffering servant'. From this justice any tendency towards forced domination of the other, spiritual or otherwise, is excised. Bresson upholds here a worldview based on the supremacy of those spiritual values that claim the sacrifice of the ego and are unlikely to bring social recognition, quite the reverse of what the world deems as admirable.

THE TRIAL OF JOAN OF ARC (1962)

In spite of the typical confiscation of Joan of Arc by political and nationalistic discourses, Bresson manages, like Carl Theodor Dreyer whose Joan we shall examine in a later chapter, to elude all these aspects and concentrate on her spiritual life, giving the film a meditative quality.[14] Nonetheless, in other ways, Bresson's *The Trial of Joan of Arc* (1962) is radically different from Dreyer's *Passion*. Bresson deliberately avoided the ecstatic views of eyes cast to heaven and the close-ups so beloved by Dreyer. His preferred look is detached and the film's authenticity is provided not through a historical

reconstruction, documentary-like, but through a spiritual reconstruction based on the transcripts of her interrogations. In the absence of any other historical evidence, Joan comes to life through her own words, as the viewer is advised in the opening of the film: 'there is no tomb, no portrait, but we have better than her portrait, her words before the judges at Rouen'. Joan's role as a holy fool is used to arraign the clerical establishment. Bresson is very particular in showing at the end of the film that Joan's persecutors took any possible measures to erase all her material traces. But this assists Bresson's endeavor to capture a 'non-historical truth', since what is left, her words, are the carriers of a reality that comes from beyond her, from eternity.[15]

The Trial of Joan of Arc presents five successive interrogations of Joan in which the bishop in charge of her trial, Cauchon, is trying to force her to admit the delusional character of her 'voices', or at least trap her with questions that would discredit her and any claim to the reality of her visions.[16] Her poised answers, never theologically erroneous, are puzzling, contradicting her lack of education. However, given that they correspond to the transcripts, the words betray the fact that Joan's source of inspiration is not of this world. Perhaps even more than with the country priest, Joan gives the impression that she is a 'possessed being' whose body shelters 'an extraordinary force coming from the supernatural'.[17] This 'automaton of grace' as Susan Sontag calls her, comes very close to what Bresson demands from his 'models' (his actors): that they be vehicles rather than performers.[18]

This is not equivalent to saying that Joan is deprived of her own will, though she is the perfect illustration of Deleuze's theory of choice. Asked: 'How did you know that it was [Saint] Michael?' she replies 'I soon believed it. I had the will to believe it. . .'. Grace cannot force itself onto human will. The person of faith is aware of the freedom to choose whether to believe or not. Joan chooses to believe passionately in the reality of her voices. While it is true that the essence of the film is the opposition between Joan and the bishop Cauchon, it also develops into a tension between her and the ecclesiastical establishment.[19] Asked: 'Do you believe you are subject to the church on earth?' she replies: 'Our Lord is to be served first'. The answer cannot be contested, but it is nevertheless a challenge for the institution which Cauchon represents. For this reason, he is more interested in silencing her, in making her admit that she was wrong about her voices. Signing the recantation is, therefore, more important than the burning at the stake, and as a result he will not ultimately deny her Holy Communion even if she is considered a heretic.

Like the country priest, Joan's solitude is total, apart from her voices and the occasional gestures of sympathy coming from Isambert, a Dominican brother. Visually, she is abstracted from the normal order of things by the fact that she never appears in the same shot with anybody else, least of all with Cauchon, not even when the interrogation moves to the confines of her own small cell. Besides her voices, what sets her apart is her virginity,

which is emphatically asserted, contested, acknowledged and threatened. Her virginity not only crosses the gender barrier but points to an androgyny professed only in the monastic asceticism. This becomes the only material 'proof' that could legitimate her spiritual experience.

As in the country priest's case, Joan's passion for her voices develops into a 'holy passion'. She recants under the threat of the stake but quickly realizes that it would be a sin to betray those voices that she has been obstinately defending during the trial. Bresson here doesn't make use of the biblical parallels that were favoured in the *Diary*, but, as with Christ, Joan's own party has deserted her and she is faced only with her judges and the hostile crowd. To emphasise her position as an object of ridicule an anonymous leg from the crowd attempts to trip her on her way to the stake. The last images that Bresson shows are the cross that she has asked to see, followed by the stake, empty, with no trace of her body, as if she has already passed both her body and soul into the world beyond.

Bresson used Joan to demonstrate the way in which the simple fool exposes truth in a corrupt world. The contemporary applicability of the character is indicated by Bresson's description of her as a 'modern young girl'.[20] Joan stands for any innocent victim martyred for their understanding of truth, a truth that is rather a question of individual conscience and choice. Joan enters into conflict with the very institution that regulates truth—the Church—as well as the institution for which truth can be politically inconvenient—the state. Both institutions connive to bring the offender

Figure 5.2 Joan enveloped by smoke at the stake. (*The Trial of Joan of Arc*)

to a sham trial, with the outcome decided in advance. As some of the clerics called to judge her object on leaving the court: 'None of us here is free to say his opinion. We cannot judge under constraint'. This tension between the individual and the institution appointed to keep the established order is repeated by Bresson, and Joan's suffering critiques the complicity of the world in evil. Joan herself spells out Cauchon's real motif for persecuting her: 'God chose a simple girl as an intermediary': such a character was an offence and scandal for the learned and powerful.

AU HASARD BALTHAZAR (1966)

A donkey would certainly make an unexpected candidate for a holy fool, and even less a candidate for sainthood. Still, it is Bresson's confessed intention to present us with 'a living creature who's completely humble, completely holy'.[21] In order to do so he humanizes his protagonist from the outset, making him pass through stages similar to a human's life, not only biological but also spiritual. Taken from his mother as a suckling foal, he is baptized in jest by the children whose gift he is, receiving the biblical name Balthazar. Years later, when he is the property of another owner who uses him for hard labour, he remembers the manor where he had a happy existence with the children Marie and Jacques, and returns to the stables. Only an adolescent Marie remains but she receives him with open arms. He obediently serves to pull Marie's chariot. Marie is very fond of Balthazar but fails to protect him from her colleague Gerard's gratuitous violence, falling herself prey to his advances. No longer required as an embarrassing means of transportation, the donkey is sold to other people, yet Gerard's cruelty follows him everywhere. His continuous torments only have a respite when he becomes part of a circus as a genius mathematician. This moment of glory is short lived, however, and Balthazar returned to his abusive masters. He dies peacefully surrounded by sheep after a gunshot injury sustained while being forced by Gerard to carry contraband goods up the mountain.

Rather like Balaam's donkey (Numbers 22:21–39), who is able to see God's angel while his master does not and receives a beating for his apparent disobedience, Balthazar is depicted in a way which suggests that he is endowed with a certain intuitive capacity of understanding what is going on around him. Balthazar is not, therefore, employed only as a pretext for the director to make an inventory of the human vices affecting him as he passes from one owner to another, but he is also designed to have a disturbing presence. In keeping with the common reputation for stubbornness that donkeys have, Balthazar is wise enough to show an initial opposition to fulfilling orders when his service is not put to a good use or when he is prompted to do something bad: prior to being beaten into accepting, he refuses to run away with the bread that should be delivered to people, or to carry Gerard's contraband goods. Despite being the most opaque of all Bresson's

characters, devoid as he is of speech and limited in reactions, Balthazar's eyes suggest an unusual awareness and understanding of the situations around him. In order to create this impression his face is shown in close-up a few times, including when he is crowned by Marie with flowers in a sign of affection, when Gerard lustfully chases Marie around him, and when he is used to distribute the fodder to the circus animals. This latter scene is particularly revelatory: Bresson uses a series of shots/reverse shots normally used to show the participants in a dialogue in order to give the impression that his protagonist is capable of exchanging glances and communicating with all the other animals locked up behind bars and empathizing with their plight.

Bresson's primary intention is not, however, to give us the portrayal of an exceptionally intelligent animal, but rather to confer on Balthazar those qualities necessary to turn him into a symbol. In order to do so he also invests his suffering with a higher significance by using a few obvious parallels with the passion of Christ. Balthazar is baptized in jest, Marie puts on his head a wreath of flowers reminiscent of a crown of thorns and he is ruthlessly whipped to be made to draw water from a well until complete exhaustion, evoking Christ's flagellation. He is finally made to climb up burdened with contraband goods, harnessed and chained, the mountain turning into his own Golgotha. Balthazar's shoulder is pierced not by a spear but by a bullet and he dies peacefully surrounded by sheep, accompanied by the music of Schubert's Piano Sonata D959—a musical work renowned for juxtaposing extremes of serenity and violence. The two last scenes recall the

Figure 5.3 Balthazar peacefully passing away. (*Au hazard Balthazar*)

imagery of both the *Agnus Dei* who takes away the sins of the world and the Good Shepherd.

Besides the biblical references which made the donkey the perfect choice to embody Bresson's conceptions of innocence and sanctity, its appearance in Dostoevsky's *Idiot* is not without relevance given the director's appreciation for the Russian author. Prince Myshkin recounts to his distant relatives the strange episode of his stupor being shaken off when he hears a donkey braying in the market-place in Switzerland, and confesses his fondness of the animal. The donkey comes to represent an epiphany which helps to open his eyes to the world. The suggestion here is that there has to be an element of humility and self-denial in order to see world in a manner that does not reduce it to the simple object of human domination. Balthazar's and Myshkin's destinies are similar in as much as they both represent that kind of extreme purity and selflessness which attracts both love and hostility. As Christ enters into Jerusalem as a King and Messiah on the back of a humble donkey, thereby reversing the established model of power, so do Balthasar and Myshkin show the world a model of humility, forbearance and nonresistance. The two protagonists stand united by their idiocy: the former's bestial lack of reason and the latter's mental deficiency. In both cases their idiocy is reinterpreted on a higher level as a bearer of holiness. There is, however, a fundamental difference between the two, ingrained in Balthazar's condition: he is born in bondage and his freedom can only be exercised through an alternation of willed submission and small gestures of opposition, with the latter overcome by beating and violent oppression.

Bresson was clearly interested in exploring the relationship of domination that Balthazar experiences with his successive masters. His preoccupation is not with the opposition within the human-animal relationship, but rather with the parallels it provides with human experience, a point underlined by the fact that Bresson links Balthazar's fate with Marie's who herself falls under Gerard's dominance. Bresson shows that for domination to succeed other people need to be reduced to their animality: the animality here being defined in terms of the inability to speak.[22] Regardless of how intelligent and perceptive Balthazar appears to be, he cannot talk, so he can be mistreated without remorse. In her turn, Marie is hardly spoken to by Gerard: Their relationship is reduced to invasive and brutal gestures through which he slowly takes possession of her and asserts his domination. Through Balthazar our judgment of how Marie is treated by her boyfriend becomes sharper. Balthazar is owned and handled as a slave creature, but Marie, Bresson appears to suggest, is becoming the same in a figurative sense. Domination, the director indicates, perpetuates itself in forms that we might not identify as historical slavery but which amount to the same.

The whip, the harness and the chain are utilized by Bresson as visual signs of domination. When Marie uses Balthazar to pull her chariot we see her stroking him affectionately, after which the camera cuts in to her whip, its lash tightly fastened around the stock as if she is determined not to use it.

By comparison, the farmer who used him to draw water from the well holds the whip ready for action. While the whip also represents a sign of torture, the harness and the chain stand for Balthazar's imprisonment. His universe becomes a prison especially in relation to Gerard whose hands are emphatically depicted in close-up grabbing and holding Balthazar's chain. There is, however, an implied continuity between the ancient and and the modern eras in terms of domination. Gerard appears to be a product of modernity: riding his bike, he is the first to point out that the donkey is an outdated means of locomotion and later he is given a portable radio by his employer. Yet he employs age-old tools of domination over Balthazar, making him the embodiment of the ever-present human instinct for domination. Balthazar's presence, in all his vulnerability and innocence, has the gift of drawing out all that is good and evil in people.

BRESSONIAN PESSIMISM

If Joan of Arc and the curé of Ambricourt are rather conventional representations of the Latin idea of holy foolishness, in his subsequent films Bresson develops the figure in darker and arguably more modern ways. This reached a climax in his portrayal of Charles in *The Devil, Probably* (1977). The moral profile of this holy fool should be read against the spiritual coordinates that the director sets and his role understood within the logic of the director's peculiar apocalyptic vision. If this logic is not accepted, Charles can appear to be just another of Bresson's suicidal characters. In what follows I will discuss Bresson's pessimism, how it evolved and deepened during his career, as well as two attendant and interdependent themes: imprisonment as human condition and death as the solution to this situation. The latter includes the issue of suicide and I will highlight the particularities of Bresson's thinking on this matter. I will show that, in his artistic vision, suicide takes the form of a final protest against the world and constitutes the only solution capable of asserting the possibility of transcendence. It is the ultimate form of redemptive suffering. Moreover, I would like to suggest that in this respect Bresson's vision comes very close to that of Tarkovsky in the latter's final two films, *Nostalghia* and *The Sacrifice*.

Bresson's pessimism is a recurrent theme in his later works and has received much comment from critics. Whatever the nature of the protagonists' tribulations in Bresson's earlier works—to be more precise the first six films excluding the 25-minute comedy short *Public Affairs* (1934)—salvation of some kind is achieved in this life through the synergy of divine grace and human will, even if this is incomplete until physical death. Gradually, Bresson moved towards a vision in which grace is absent from this world, leaving only a spiritual void so unbearable it can lead characters to the point of despair and suicide. I will sketch this evolution. Bresson's vision of the human condition turns bleaker after *Au hasard Balthazar* (1966). This is

shaped by two features which come to define almost all of his later works: on the one hand, evil engulfs the world in forms that are increasingly impersonal and autonomous (this contrasts with a more clearly defined vision of human agency in his first films); on the other hand, as René Predal observes, 'it becomes harder and harder for grace to impose itself in the end . . . the transcendence is not apparent, the void becomes quite terrifying, and the neutrality of director's gaze icier and icier'.[23] This new gaze also brought into focus new solutions that, taken literally, pose a challenge to Christian theology.

Bresson's next film, *Mouchette* (1967) raises the problematic issue of suicide in his work. His young heroine Mouchette suffers not only the social injustices of the poverty into which she was born, but also inexplicable cruelties inflicted on her by family and community. Her innocence remains untainted in spite of her expectations being dashed from all sides. Bresson chooses to end his film in a manner open to various interpretations. The final scene shows Mouchette playing with death: in her white muslin dress she rolls down the hill towards the water three times. First she stops short of the water, gets up and waves at a man on his tractor who ignores her. Then she continues her game by rolling into a bush. On the third attempt her body rolls down the hill out of the frame and disappears in the water with a splash. The camera only shows the rippling rings of water fading away while Monteverdi's *Magnificat* from *Vespers for the Blessed Virgin* delivers the aural commentary, via praise for the God who 'has put down the mighty from their thrones and exalted the lowly' (Lk 1:52). And indeed, for the heroine, abused by all who have found themselves in a position of power over her—and that meant practically the whole village—God is the only hope that remained. Bresson's technique of substituting image by sound is due to his belief that 'the ear is much more creative than the eye'.[24] The *Magnificat* is evocative of a spiritual presence in a way in which image by itself could not invoke.[25] His careful use of image and sound contributes to the suspense of moral judgment usually passed on incidents of this sort. Her death is suggested in the manner of a serene passing away into another world, a 'form of redemption and rebirth', postulated as the 'only way, it seems, to find peace'.[26]

What distinguishes *Mouchette* from Bresson's previous films is the way in which he envisions the possibility of salvation: in present life or through death. Two out of his five major films before 1967 stand out as particularly bright in terms of the possibility of spiritual regeneration and salvation from within the confines of this world. These two notable exceptions feature the French resistance prisoner Fontaine in *A Man Escaped—The Wind Bloweth Where It Listeth* (1956) and Michael in *Pickpocket* (1959). The former plods his way out of prison by perseverance and chance, or grace. It is a form of deliverance which is religious in as much as it is underlain by an unwavering determination to succeed, met halfway by the benevolent hand of providence. The latter, whose moral portrait is loosely inspired by

Dostoevsky's Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment*, follows an ascendant trajectory leading him both to repentance and love, and ultimately redemption. The other three films of the same period: *Journal of a Country Priest*, *The Trial of Joan of Arc*, and *Au hasard Balthazar* all end with the death of the protagonist. Salvation is acquired through death, and is experienced no longer as liberation *within* this life, but *from* this life altogether.

Intertwined with this is Bresson's artistic vision of life as an incarcerating universe. Paul Schrader argues that the director is actually the inheritor of a line of thought that is linked to the body/soul dichotomy in Plato and the Scriptures, as well as St Paul's conception of body as prison.[27] While it is true that Bresson tends to see death as a liberation from the body in earlier films such as the *Diary of a Country Priest*, *A Man Escaped* and *The Trial of Joan of Arc*, because it is through the body that most of the suffering is inflicted, from *Au hasard, Balthazar* onwards the sense that there is no escape from the world itself intensifies. This translates into a second circle of walls around the soul, ushering in 'the image of the prison world, of man as captive being'.[28] It is likely that Bresson owes this image to Pascal in whose work the 'cachot' (the prison) is the central metaphor used as a means of situating humankind in relation to infinity and to express our present fallen condition. However, Bresson proceeds to complicate the picture further with the creation of an inner prison brought into being through conscious collaboration with evil.

This is a universe in which grace is not obstructed by external space, but it can transform it by indicating the workings of providence, as in Fontaine's case. It is a universe infused by grace in all forms: 'All is grace' are the concluding words of the country priest. For the person of grace, it works from within, which creates a tension with the reality outside. It renders the priest of Ambricourt as a perpetual 'prisoner of the Holy Agony' and Joan as a perpetual prisoner of her own martyrdom. Grace introduces a fundamental disparity between modes of existence which, for Bresson, can be translated in his characters through the experience of oppression and persecution. Joan's 'voices' turn her into a political enemy to the English and an inconvenient prophetess to the church authorities. The priest's total dedication to his vocation brings him into conflict with the ways of the world and the turns the world into a cause for his suffering. The same grace appears providential for Fontaine's physical salvation and Michel's moral regeneration. For Joan and the priest the world is the prison; for Fontaine and Michel the world is instrumental to their liberation.

In *Mouchette* Bresson takes a step further since there is no external factor that directly causes the death of the heroine. The narrative does not offer a way out of Mouchette's predicament and for her, once she has experienced the worst, life cannot be more than a repetition of abuses and rejection. Following this logic, the only way to put an end to evil is by withdrawal from life, to escape from the prison of this world. The suggestion is disturbing and leads to an uneasy theological situation. Such pessimism can only be predicated on the premise of a world which is irredeemably evil or in

which the possibilities of spiritual awakening are indeed very limited and restricted to certain individuals. Given the French context, the influence of Jansenism on the development of such a view is worth considering. This religious movement became popular in France in the seventeenth century, and its main theological emphases are the Fall of man, the wretched condition of the post-lapsarian humankind, the primacy of grace over free will, the dynamic nature of conversion and the importance of an austere lifestyle.[29] Jansenism has typically been used to account for the asceticism of Bresson's style and elucidate the rapport between will and predestination in his works, with the director himself admitting to such an influence.[30] However, as I have suggested, there exists the possibility of an even deeper influence of Jansenism on Bresson, through the work of Blaise Pascal. This suggestion requires qualification, however, since although the premises may be similar, Bresson ultimately develops these themes in a direction alien to Pascal's thinking. In addition, in the later films one essential part of the Jansenist universe is lost: the working of grace.

Mouchette can be seen as just a transition to an even darker strain of pessimism depicted by Bresson in *A Gentle Creature* (1969). Paradoxically, this shift coincides with Bresson's first colour film. It is the story of an unhappy marriage in which the solely materialist concerns of the husband drive the wife towards despair and suicide. The film contains a paradigmatic gesture: the husband, a pawnbroker, snatches an ivory Christ from the gold crucifix that his future wife presents to him as her last possession. He weighs the cross in the scales, estimates its value and tells her to keep the Christ. She refuses and takes the money offered in exchange. This is not an isolated case, but indicates the spiritual collapse which is endemic to this world. In *Lancelot of the Lake* (1974), contrary to the classical idealised versions, we witness the spiritual failure of the quest of the Grail. This uncompromising look back on one of the most important symbols of medieval religiosity 'prefigures the dissolution of Western values represented by Bresson in *The Devil, Probably* and the *la ronde*-like study of the nefarious effects of capitalism in *L'Argent*'.[31] Given that one of Bresson's unfulfilled projects was a film called *Genesis*, we can see him working towards a grander design and towards a universal vision that incorporates the whole spiritual history of humanity, which under the direction of this 'new Saint John' takes the form of a 'transcript of a trial without possibility of appeal of an itinerary to perdition'.[32] Bresson's critics typically refer back to Jansenism in order to explain his theology but his modern side is overlooked. It is significant to mention in this respect that, as if anticipating Bresson's categorical account of Western civilization, the French-born Protestant theologian Gabriel Vahanian had written his *The Death of God: The Culture of Our Post-Christian Era* (1961) less than a decade earlier, reaching similar conclusions.

This waning of Christianity in the Bressonian universe is taken as an opportunity to express his ideas and the presence of God without the props of theology as a doctrinal system. Susan Sontag was already noticing this

tendency in 1964: 'Bresson's Catholicism is a language for rendering a certain vision of human action, rather than a "position" that is stated . . . The proof is that Bresson is able to say the same thing without Catholicism in his three other films' (by which she meant at the time *Ladies of the Bois de Boulogne*, *A Man Escaped* and *Pickpocket*).[33] Schrader sees this move in his later creations as a shift from 'saintliness in a world without God' to 'saintliness in a world without theology', but actually the picture Bresson creates is of a post-Christian world, fashioned this way by its own will, in which God is the only hope left to humanity. What he rejects is in fact what he calls the religious 'ideology', in an impulse that seems very similar to Kierkegaard's search for authenticity: 'Ideology is the moral. I don't want to be ideological. I want to be true.'[34] Bresson's attitude is provoked by disillusionment, later in life, with the Catholic Church, which he sees as touched by the general trend towards materialism: '. . . when people become so materialistic, religion is not possible, because every religion is poverty and poverty is the way of having contact with mystery and with God. When Catholicism wants to be materialistic, God is not there'.[35] Deleuze points out his intellectual affinities: "This extreme moralism which is opposed to morality, this faith which is opposed to religion . . . had much in common with Pascal and Kierkegaard, with Jansenism and Reformism'.[36] *The Devil, Probably* gives the highest expression to this thinking in Bresson's late *oeuvre*, and is the best example of the way in which Bresson reorientated the holy fool away from its conventional characterization.

THE DEVIL, PROBABLY (1977)

The Devil, Probably is Bresson's most uncompromising indictment of modern society. That the title evokes Dostoevsky's *The Devils* (1872) and also the discussion between Ivan and his father in *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880) is not mere coincidence. Bresson had not only adapted two of Doestoevsky's works for *A Gentle Creature* and *Four Nights of a Dreamer* (1972) and drew inspiration from him in *Pickpocket*, but he also considered Doestoevsky the only novelist with whom he could agree.[37] Apart from this, there are other relations that can be established between *The Devil, Probably* and *The Devils*. Both are intended to be an insight into the political and religious establishment that existed in their corresponding societies and eras. In both works, the trigger that sets the action in motion is a murder. It is also significant that one source of inspiration for *The Devils* was a huge project called 'Atheism' which was supposed to tell the story of a character who, losing faith, had to undergo intense spiritual suffering and conduct an investigation of all religious faiths, in a manner similar to the inquiry conducted by Bresson's protagonist into the available religious, pseudo-religious or non-religious beliefs that he saw flourishing during the 1970s.

The historical moment that Bresson chooses to portray captures what is referred to as 'the failure of the sixties'. In as much as the turbulence of May '68 was a political failure, *The Devil, Probaby,* can be considered a film of 'political despair'.[38] The affirmation should be qualified though: in his elliptic manner, Bresson is not interested in analysing in any detail the ideologies and institutions he wishes to expose, which indeed can create the impression of an 'apolitical pessimism'.[39] He makes an inventory of the nihilist tendencies and the ecological apocalypticism in the aftermath of May '68, which themselves could lead to political pessimism, but as I will suggest later he seems to rather point to the possibility—at least theoretically—of an apolitical hope.

The film begins with a close-up of a newspaper headline referring to a suicide in the Père Lachaise cemetery, immediately contradicted by another headline that fades in and suggests it was actually a murder. The rest of the film is a flashback that leaves the reader to ponder over the reasons and significance of this act. In one of the first scenes a group of friends discuss the best way to walk. They go to a political meeting where a voice nihilistically proclaims destruction, an attitude dismissed by the protagonist Charles, who seems to be the leader of the group. In the following sequence we see Michel from the group and his fellow students watching footage of terrible environmental pollution. We later find out that Michel is also an author whose book on ecological issues does not enjoy much success, and that he is deeply in love with Alberte. Charles is a highly intelligent person, but also a drop out from university, uninterested in pecuniary matters. Both Alberte and her friend Edwige are in love with him. A second attempt at finding something meaningful is hinted through their attending a religious meeting, but they leave in disappointment. Charles moves in with another friend, Edwige, and they pick up from the street Valentin, a drug addict under their care, whom Charles convinces to accompany him to Notre Dame at night. They listen to Monteverdi's *Ego Dormio* but towards morning Valentin breaks open the offertory boxes and steals the money. The police arrive and take in Charles for questioning, which leaves him depressed. Worried, his friends persuade him to go to a psychoanalyst. Here he confesses that he cannot kill himself because he cannot stand not being able to see and hear, and that he hates both life and death. He also acknowledges God's existence and incomprehensibility. At the end of the session the psychoanalyst unwittingly mentions that in Roman antiquity the nobles had their friends or servants kill them. Charles asks Valentin to kill him in exchange for money, which the latter does, indifferently, in the Père Lachaise cemetery, without allowing his friend to finish his last sentence.

Bresson writes in *Notes on the Cinematographer*: 'Hide the ideas, but so that people find them. The most important will be the most hidden'.[40] Still, *The Devil, Probably*, as well as its protagonist, shouts its discontent with the nihilistic, religious, psychoanalytical and ecological discourses and apparently leaves nothing hidden. It is a cacophony of voices and discourses

which is best summarized by the meeting in St Eustache church in which each participant utters one sentence without really entering into dialogue, while the organ punctuates their discussion with discordant sounds intermingled with the ludicrous noise of a vacuum cleaner in the background. The only moment of harmony is experienced in Notre Dame, at night, when Charles listens to Monterverdi's *Ego Dormio* played on a portable record-player, while lying on the floor in a sleeping-bag. The lyrics are from the *Song of Songs*, an Old Testament *epithalamium* or nuptial song which is allegorically interpreted in the Judeo-Christian tradition as representing the loving relationship between God and his church or between God and the human soul. The first line: 'Ego dormio et cor meum vigilat' (I slept but my heart was awake) came to be interpreted in the mystical tradition as symbolic of the state of contemplation in which the senses are shut down so that the attention remains fixed in contemplation.[41] Charles is shown lying still on the floor, listening attentively, dead to the world and its tumult, in a prefiguration of his later death. It is the only time during his numerous attempts to find something meaningful that he doesn't walk away from his attempted encounter. The next morning he will be taken away by the police—and thus the world intrudes to spoil his fleeting moment of transcendence.

This scene offers the key for the interpretation of Charles who, as the film shows, is the last searcher: the last man who is willing to listen to God. He is the one who returns to the cathedral at night, after the daily clamor finishes. The creed he professes, a citation from Victor Hugo, is one to which the director himself would subscribe: 'When you come in a church, or a cathedral, God is there, but if a priest happens to come, God is not there anymore'. This is a reference to the moment the group attends a religious meeting at St Eustache at which a suggestion is raised that the Christianity of the future will be without religion. In other words, God has been evacuated from Christianity leaving it to continue its existence as merely a cultural artifact. Bresson views this situation as a spiritual void, and makes Charles highly aware of this, an abyss which cannot be filled by dedicating himself either to a cause or the love of a woman. Even if young people of a similar age are seen engaged in support for different causes, he fails to rally under any, perhaps sensing the vanity of such commitments. The famous episode in a bus, from which the title of the film is derived, presents this aspect in a different light. While Charles and Michel are in the bus, a discussion starts and one of the travellers asks: 'Who, then, is maneuvering us on the sly?' to which another one answers: 'The devil probably'. Immediately following this the noise of a collision puts an end to the verbal exchange.

Analyzing the characteristics of Bresson's style, and highlighting the differences between Bresson's cinematography and that of the mainstream, Adams Sitney concludes that: 'The viewer of 'le cinématographe' is invited to read images figuratively, to escape from the nightmarish blindness of the commercial "cinema's" literalness'.[42] By the same token, Bresson's films should not be taken too literally and caution should be exercised before

assessing them theologically as factual.[43] In particular, Charles in *The Devil, Probably* should not be judged by measures different from those applied, for example, to Tarkovsky's Domenico. Interestingly, because the latter is typically interpreted through a nationalistic lens as a holy fool *à la russe*, such questions have never arisen. That Bresson endows his hero with the same significance may not only be inferred from the narration of the film itself, but is clearly stated in interviews that Bresson gave.

Bresson states in one of his last interviews that he made *The Devil, Probably* as a protest against indifference and reminds his questioner that people were at that very time burning themselves alive for the same reason.[44] The practice immediately brings to mind Tarkovsky's holy fool Domenico in *Nostalghia*, who sets himself on fire on the Capitolium. The act is raised to the realm of the symbolic—not a taking of life, but giving it for a higher purpose, in order to protest against the spiritual desert that the world has become. For Bresson 'there is something which makes suicide possible—not even possible but absolutely necessary: it is the vision of void, the feeling of void which is impossible to bear'.[45] Charles hates dying but feels compelled to do it. He has rehearsed the moment of death in his mind, imagining the 'sublime thoughts' he will have, which demonstrates the significance he has attached to his gesture. *The Devil, Probably* continues the theme of life as prison, but the director is careful to hint at the mission with which he has invested his protagonist, which contradicts an interpretation of his end as the 'unequivocal triumph of Thanatos'.[46] Bresson chooses to have Charles killed rather than committing suicide, in order that he can divert attention away from questions over the ethics and psychology of suicide, while he invests death as a carrier of meaning.

With *The Devil, Probably* Bresson helped to create a new critical function for the holy fool, abstracted from its religious context. By creating a picture of a world corrupted by mercantilism and where God appears dead, Bresson allows his foolish protagonist to express his pessimism about human society. In such a world where the alternatives are either nihilism or religion as a mere cultural relic, both are found wanting by Charles. This spiritual death of the world is accompanied by an ecological crisis which appears to prefigure a physical extinction. For such a world to continue, Bresson, through his representation of the folly of Charles, can envisage either a spiritual solution or none at all.

It is important to notice various parallels in the final expressions of holy foolishness depicted by Bresson and Tarkovsky. These parallels can be due to the impending sense that both directors share a view that the world cannot continue in its present state–that a global catastrophe is underway. In both directors these latter-day holy fools lose the insignia of their particular religious traditions. Their profile is actually shaped by the lack of spirituality around them and the inefficiency of each director's respective religious traditions to fight it. As a consequence, characters appear that take it upon themselves to draw attention to this situation and to reaffirm the possibility

of salvation. They deserve the attribute of 'holy' not because they necessarily lead a saintly life but because, in a world engulfed by a godless materialism, they are the last to keep the flame of transcendence alight.

As Tarkovsky achieved with the Russian holy fool, so Bresson managed to update his representation of the Catholic holy idiot so that it unveiled and critiqued those problems the director saw inherent in modern society. Both directors came to use the fool rather less as an opponent of the power structures of the day, and more to oppose what they saw as the overriding problem of indifference and spiritual apathy in the modern world. Nonetheless, as the above analysis has demonstrated, the suffering associated with holy foolishness in the French cinematic tradition has invested a degree of pessimism and ambiguity into the modern fool's salvific power. It is perhaps for this reason that the holy fool in French cinema only rarely escapes a religious context: a reflection of the legacy of Pascal's idea that the holy fool is a person of absolute dedication and faith. Such qualities are necessary to enable the fools to endure the suffering that makes possible their function as critics of society: suffering gladly in order that they can expose injustice and inhumanity in an apparently uncaring world.

NOTES

1. Robert Bresson, *Notes on the Cinematographer* (Kobenhavn: Green Integer, 1997), 82.
2. André Bazin, "*Le Journal d'un curé de campagne* and the Stylistics of Robert Bresson" in *Robert Bresson*, ed. James Quandt (Toronto: Cinematheque Ontario, 1998), 33.
3. René Predal: "Robert Bresson, L'aventure interieure" in Quandt, 83.
4. Michel Estève, *Robert Bresson* (Paris: Seghers, 1975), 69.
5. Ibid., 100.
6. Susan Sontag, "Spiritual Style in the Films of Robert Bresson" in Quandt, 63.
7. Sara Anson-Vaux, "Divine Skepticism: The Films of Robert Bresson," *Christianity and Literature* 53 (2004): 523.
8. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Bernanos: an Ecclesial Existence* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1996), 389–390.
9. Bazin, "*Le Journal*," 34.
10. Ibid., 33.
11. von Balthasar, *Bernanos*, 483.
12. Raymond Durgnat, "*Le Journal d'un curé de campagne*" in *The Films of Robert Bresson*, ed. Ian Cameron (London: Studio Vista, 1969), 46.
13. Paul Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer* (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 1988), 72–75.
14. Kevin J Harry, "Jeanne au cinema" in *Fresh Verdicts on Joan of Arc*, ed. Bonnie Wheeler and Charles T. Wood (New York; London: Garland Publishing, 1996), 256.
15. Bresson, *Notes*, 128.
16. For reasons of clarity I ascribe to some characters the names under which they are known from the trial documents, which Bresson leaves unmentioned in his film.
17. Predal, "Robert Bresson," 73.

18. Sontag, "Spiritual Style," 63.
19. Jean Sémolué, *Bresson ou l'acte pur des metamorphoses* (Paris: Flammarion, 1993), 119.
20. Robert Bresson, "Interview with Robert Bresson," Special Feature, *The Trial of Joan of Arc* (Artificial Eye, 2005).
21. Bert Cardullo, "Transcendental Style, Poetic Precision: Robert Bresson" in *Action!: Interviews with Directors from Classical Hollywood to Contemporary Iran*, ed. Gary Morris (London; New York: Anthem Press, 2009), 266.
22. Brian Price, *Neither God Nor Master: Robert Bresson and Radical Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 78.
23. Keith Reader, "'D'ou cela vient'il?': Notes on Three Film by Robert Bresson" in Quandt, 295; Predal, "Robert Bresson," 92.
24. Robert Bresson, "The Question," Interview by Jean-Luc Godard and Michel Delahaye, in Quandt, 459.
25. Beth Kathryn Curran, *Touching God: The Novels of Georges Bernanos and the Films of Robert Bresson* (New York: Peter Lang, 2006), 105.
26. Predal, "Robert Bresson," 83.
27. Schrader, *Transcendental Style*, 88.
28. Predal, "Robert Bresson," 82.
29. Richard Parish, "Port-Royal and Jansenism" in *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, vol. 3 *The Renaissance*, ed. Glyn P. Norton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 476.
30. In contrast, Paul Schrader argues that the roots of the Bressonian aesthetic form is to be found in medieval scholasticism and his techniques of portraiture in Byzantine iconography, *Transcendental Style*, 95–103.
31. Tony Pipolo, "Fire and Ice: The Films of Robert Bresson," *Cineaste* 31 (2006–07): 24.
32. Predal, "Robert Bresson," 93.
33. Sontag, "Spiritual Style," 66.
34. Paul Schrader, "Robert Bresson, Possibly" in Quandt, 487.
35. Ibid., 493.
36. Gilles Deleuze *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image* (London; New York: Continuum, 2008), 119.
37. Schrader, "Robert Bresson," 489.
38. Jean-Michel Frodon, *Robert Bresson* (Paris: Cahiers du Cinéma, 2007), 80.
39. Pipolo, "Fire and Ice," 25.
40. Bresson, *Notes*, 44.
41. Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness* (London: Methuen, 1911), 434.
42. P. Adams Sitney, "Cinematography vs. the Cinema: Bresson's Figures" in Quandt, 162.
43. Marvin Zeman in "The Suicide of Robert Bresson," *Cinema 6 no.* 3 (1971), 37–42 goes as far as to argue that Bresson was suicidal and inscribes him in a line of thought that from St Ambrose through John Donne and Georges Bernanos considers suicide can be justified.
44. Michel Ciment, "I Seek Not Description But Vision: Robert Bresson on *L'Argent*" in Quandt, 503.
45. Schrader, "Robert Bresson," 489.
46. Keith Reader, *Robert Bresson* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 133.

6 The Fool's Challenge to Reason in Danish Cinema

> In those days a Christian was a fool in the eyes of the world . . .
> One is now a Christian as a matter of fact;
> anyone wanting to be one with infinite passion is a fool.
>
> Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*

A man enters a room, extends a hand for the reverend to shake, introduces himself as Mikkel Borgen, the eldest son of the family and offers the priest a seat and a cigarette. The reverend informs Mikkel that he has already met his brother Johannes. Rather surprised, Mikkel expresses his hope that Johannes was not unpleasant to him. The reverend asks whether Johannes was born strange or if a love affair is to be blamed for his mental state. Mikkel replies it was actually due to Johannes reading Kierkegaard during his theology training, when he was suffering from a period of speculation and doubts. Far from challenging the connection between Kierkegaard and Johannes's madness, the reverend's following remarks appear to strengthen it. While this scene taken from Carl Dreyer's *The Word* overtly acknowledges one of his religious sources of inspiration, how did Kierkegaard and other religious thinkers shape the idea of holy foolishness in the Protestant world?

Whereas artists in the Orthodox and Catholic cultural spaces have hagiographical models of holy fools from which artists can draw, this is much less the case in the Protestant Christian world. How, therefore, has this affected the representation of the holy fool and its critical function in European nations where Protestant traditions are dominant? I have chosen to explore this aspect in European film by investigating Danish cinema, which enjoys one of the richest and more cohesive national cinematic traditions in Northern Europe, thereby forming a useful counterpoint to the previous studies of Russian and French cinema. In this chapter I will focus on the representation of holy foolishness in Danish cinema, first by providing the context for understanding holy fools and their representation against the backdrop of Danish culture.[1] In order to do this I step outside the world

of film, to consider three related theological approaches, commonly referenced within accounts of Danish religion. To understand the articulation of holy foolishness in Danish film, it is useful to reflect briefly on the work of Luther, the Pietist Movement and Kierkegaard, and in particular how each wrestles with the limitations of human reason. What is perceived as impossible by these authors is also represented as beyond the bounds of possibility by several Danish film-makers. We shall see how in several films it is only through holy foolishness that the impossible is made possible. I will then move to examine the cinematic context, in which special attention will be given to the directors Carl Theodor Dreyer and Lars von Trier, whose work is particularly marked by representations of holy foolishness. The religious context for holy foolishness is often brought to the fore in Danish cinema, but recently the idea of folly has received a broader and more modern treatment through the Dogme 95 movement, a development that I will explore in the following chapter. With this exploration undertaken, I will demonstrate that in the Protestant and Scandinavian context of Danish cinema, holy foolishness aspires to two critical functions: first, it is used as a means to deconstruct the established order and, second, it is a way of signaling the presence of another kingdom to come, rooted in a radically different order that may appear at first sight to be impossible to realize.

HOLY FOOLISHNESS IN DANISH CHRISTIANITY

The theme of foolishness emerges in Danish cinema in a somewhat oblique manner. One of the key motors for understanding holy foolishness in Danish religious culture has been the central and ongoing debate in Danish philosophical life over the position of reason in relation to faith. I will work towards an understanding of the category of the 'impossible' which, as I will show, becomes a recurrent motif in the films selected for investigation. In so doing, the chapter will reveal how the 'impossible' participates in the semantic field of the 'foolish', shaping the treatment of the figure in cinema. In the last part of this section I will look at the significance of a key fictional figure in Protestant culture—Gerhard Hauptmann's Emanuel Quint—who, to the best of my knowledge, represents the only significant literary elaboration of a fictional character along the lines of holy foolishness in a Lutheran pietistic mould.

Unlike the situation in Russian culture, Danish culture has not fashioned a model of the holy fool rooted in a hagiographical tradition. The transition of the country from Roman-Catholicism to Lutheranism, formally initiated by the Danish Crown in 1536, marked the beginning of a new questioning of the powers of reason from the position of faith: a process whose manifestations can be found in the established religious orthodoxy of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and in the subsequent pietistic revivals. What was the status of reason and folly in these different theological accounts?

It is well known that Luther held very different views about the powers of reason when applied within the temporal sphere and when in relation to God.[2] He treated the latter case with diffidence. Upholding an account of human nature perverted by sin, Luther distinguished between 'right reason' or 'reason of faith', a mode of thought informed by the word of the Gospel, and 'natural' or 'human reason', the latter designating 'the intellect as an expression of the flesh and a passionate (offended) enemy of the Gospel'.[3] For Luther the message of the Gospel is contradictory to human reason, which, finding it 'absurd', 'foolish', 'impossible' and a 'paradox', is thereby 'offended'.[4] In his opinion the biblical figure who best exemplified the tension between faith and reason in an exemplary way is Abraham. He believed through faith that his wife Sarah's barren body would conceive, which to reason appears as 'absurd, foolish, improbable, yea, impossible'.[5] This conception of faith led him to the same conclusion that St Paul adopted in his *First Epistle to the Corinthians* about the Christian as a foolish person.[6] Moreover, Luther himself adopted the persona of the holy fool. In his tract entitled *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation* published in 1520, after reminding his readers about the role of the court fool to tell the truth and also St Paul's advice that 'He who wishes to be wise must become a fool', Luther exclaims: 'since I am not only a fool, but also a sworn doctor of the Holy Scripture, I am glad for the opportunity to fulfill my doctor's oath, even in the guise of the fool'.[7] From Luther's exposition of Reformed principles, to the Huguenot Elie Neau's memoirs in the seventeenth century and Kierkegaard's writings in the nineteenth, telling the truth through the mouth of the fool became an established Protestant practice.

Ultimately, faith remained a matter of the 'heart'.[8] It was to be reiterated in different forms in the following centuries, animating the pietistic movements that acquired, besides the turn towards subjectivism (with an emphasis on individual conversion) and anti-institutionalism, a strong element of anti-intellectualism, in which faith was far more than mere intellectual assent. In this respect Lutheranism was recuperating a medieval strand of Catholic mysticism which was exemplarily embodied in the life and writings of the German Dominican theologian Johannes Tauler (c1300–61). Luther was not alone in finding a spiritual master in Tauler, for he also had great influence on the pietists.[9] Significantly, from 1498 onward editions of Tauler's sermons included a later interpolation entitled 'The Friend of God from the Oberland'. The episode, supposed to have happened around 1345, involves the encounter of the spiritual 'master' with the 'friend of God', a layman who claims to have been taught directly by God and who challenges Tauler to renounce his proud reason acquired through scholasticism.[10] This unlearned but divinely illuminated character is in all probability a construct but he marks in a symbolic way, as de Certeau argues, 'the baseline of modern spirituality'.[11] This refutation of scholasticism, which also involved a refutation of the role of reason in the sphere of faith, came to be one of the pinnacles of Danish pietism.

The Herrnhutism, which was to be the most enduring form of Danish pietism, was based on the teachings of the German count Nikolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf, who, continuing the theological tradition mentioned, placed religious experience outside the scope of intellectual inquiry.[12] Permitted officially in 1739 to form societies for spiritual development, the movement was also to provide the seedbed for neo-pietistic awakenings in the nineteenth century, especially in the region of Jutland, where the family of one of the fiercest enemies of rationalism, Søren Kierkegaard, had their roots. His father, Michael Pedersen, maintained his rustic lay religiosity learned in Jutland even after he had moved to Copenhagen as a result of his affiliation with the Herrnhut Congregation of Brothers. This saw itself as the main stronghold against the rational Enlightenment values that prevailed in the official Danish state Church; at the same time the family would attend services presided over by the anti-rationalist preacher J.P. Mynster at the official state Church of Our Lady in Copenhagen.[13] When carving his own path, Kierkegaard built on the legacy of both Luther and the Pietists with their distrust of human reason.

Kierkegaard challenges the power of reason in two possible formulations: as a human faculty and as the assumption that it is embodied in the established order.[14] In terms of the former, he raises two kinds of objections. The first, philosophical in nature, concerns the finiteness of human reason, which renders it incapable of grasping the paradoxes of faith. The second, theological, objection rehearses the argument put forward by Luther in connection to the sinfulness and corruption of human nature and by extension human reason. When explored historically, this understanding of reason as finite and sinful enables him to carry out a critique of ideology.[15] Reason would represent in this case 'ideology': a product of historical circumstance, which ultimately renders 'the concept of Christ as madman and the concept of the established order integrally related'.[16]

When reason comes under attack, the idea of the 'impossible' offers the ammunition since it causes reason to acknowledge its limitations. In turn, the 'impossible' is intimately connected to the idea of the absurd.[17] The relation between the two is illuminated in connection with the Patriarch Abraham, whom both Luther and Kierkegaard took to exemplify the tension between faith and reason in an exemplary way. Johannes de Silentio, Kierkegaard's pseudonym in *Fear and Trembling*, presents Abraham as greater than every other man because he expected the impossible: that the sacrificed Isaac would be returned to him. This kind of faith can only be held 'in virtue of the absurd, by virtue of the fact that for God everything is possible', even the impossible.[18] As Alastair Hannay remarks, 'in virtue of the absurd' means not 'logically impossible' but 'humanly impossible' or 'in any intelligible way impossible'.[19] In this case, for Kierkegaard the impossible is 'that which exceeds speculative and objective comprehension and circumscription'.[20] It is on the basis of this impossibility that human reason judges something to be absurd and is 'offended' by the prospect of

such absurdity. At the same time 'the impossible' and 'the absurd' are engendered by the play of perspectives. From the inner perspective of faith there is no contradiction that can give rise to the impossible and, therefore, to the absurd; the absurd can only be perceived from an outer perspective, from the position of the non-believer.[21]

This discourse about the impossible is in fact an oblique discourse about foolishness as an aspiration of the impossible. The 'logic' of Kierkegaard illuminates this assertion. Affirming something that is impossible appears to be absurd and whoever does it is then liable to be considered a mad person. For Kierkegaard it is God who is the impossible, and the coming of infinity into the world through the person of Christ is the 'Paradox' that baffles the human mind.[22] This paradoxical faith that God can and will act in the finite reality we experience renders Christianity itself a kind of madness, something which Kierkegaard affirms repeatedly.[23] Moreover, the subjective relation to truth is madness and the one who enters into an existential relation with it is perceived as mad. The climax of this relation is called 'passion', the Danish word for 'passion' revealing an intimacy between religious enthusiasm and suffering. Thus 'passion' in Danish (*Lidenskab*) shares a root with the verb 'to suffer'.[24] Kierkegaard reaffirms for the modern world the inescapable experience of suffering that is implied in the subject's relation to truth. Again, passion-suffering is madness when seen in itself, overlooking the aim: 'The essential existential pathos in relation to an eternal happiness is acquired at so great a cost that it must from the finite point of view be regarded as simple madness to purchase it'.[25] Not only was Kierkegaard well aware that he would be taken for a fool for promoting such ideas, but he also embraced foolishness as an escape from the world and as a way to preserve his inwardness.[26]

So far, in search of a characterization of holy foolishness in the Danish context, I have pulled various strands in Lutheranism, including pietism, along two coordinates, both meant to discern the limits to reason. First, we have seen the ideal of a divine science born in the human heart, conceptualized in the medieval figure of Tauler's illuminated idiot, and second, we have explored faith as the faculty that believes all things, even the impossible. Before the start of the twentieth century, Lutheranism did not enjoy a particularly clear-cut hagiographical model or a fictional character representing the characteristics of a holy fool beyond the ordinary pious Christian. In 1910, however, the German writer Gerhart Hauptmann published his first novel, entitled *The Fool in Christ, Emanuel Quint*. The chronicler narrates Quint's activity as a 'Fool', the term with which he is constantly referred, beginning with his first appearance in public as a preacher announcing the imminence of the kingdom of heaven and denouncing the social injustices of the rich and the rulers. Quint is then followed through his rise to fame within various millenarian groupings, as well as his subsequent fall from their favour and abject death as a solitary wanderer. The omniscient chronicler offers the reader access to more than Quint's external manifestations,

including the total neglect of his body, by opening insights into Quint's inner life and mystical experiences. This psychological portrayal was shaped by the author's exposure to Moravian piety during childhood.[27] It is from there that Hauptmann's unrelenting introspection and interest in unworldiness, enthusiasm, the practice of love and self-sacrifice, as well as his anti-clericalism, originate. As Quint progressed towards consciousness of his mission and ultimately identification with Christ as the son of man, he dispenses with the use of the Gospel, which had initially provided the sole guidance for his spiritual feats. Recognizing no authority outside his personal experience, this 'seeker of God' ends up becoming his own authority, outside the confines of any Christian denomination.

Could Hauptmann's holy fool embody a Lutheran representation in the same way that Dostoevsky's idiot does in the Russian context? To start with, we should acknowledge that both are the creations of a particular era. It has been noted that the difference between Prince Myshkin and Emanuel Quint springs from the fact that the latter was conceived in an age in which religious certainties had collapsed, which better allowed for his identification with Christ.[28] Along the same lines it has been suggested that, under the influence of F.A. Dulk's *Irrgang des Lebens Jesu* (1884), which presented Jesus in strictly human terms, Hauptmann disguised under the mask of a holy fool his potentially offensive portrayal of Christ as man, a claim supported by his careful following of the biblical narrative, translated in his novel from Palestine to modern Silesia.[29] More likely, though, is that the author intended to pose through his hero a 'mighty challenge to the indifferent world of the twentieth century', confirmed by the episode at the end of the novel, where the narrator ponders what fate awaited the people the fool encountered if he were indeed Christ himself.[30] In this case Quint has a similar function to Myshkin in unraveling the moral state of society in his time. Perhaps even more so than *The Idiot,* Hauptmannn's novel offers a sociological glimpse into the contemporary religious situation, pitting established Lutheranism on the one hand against dissenting pietist groups on the other. It has never, however, equaled the fame and influence of its Russian counterpart.

A number of aspects arising from this treatment of the fool in Lutheran culture are pertinent for understanding the Danish cinematic holy fool. First, it is important to note the tradition in Lutheranism that regards complete trust in human reason as suspicious, harking back to Luther but also to older medieval authorities such as Tauler, the scholar shamed by the illuminated idiot. The possibility of the impossible challenges human reason, turning on its head what was once regarded as foolishness. Second, it is worth observing the high status of Kierkegaard in Danish culture, whose critique of reason went hand in hand with the critique of society. For the Danish philosopher reason reinforced the established order, participating in its self-deification by justifying its authority and status.[31] This insight is useful for understanding the extent to which socially sanctioned ideas of righteous belief and behaviour are offended by the holy fool. In this respect holy

foolishness, being intimately connected to weakness, functions by unmasking the structures of power, be they religious or secular, embedded in society and sanctioned by the prevailing ideology. The roots of these concepts can be seen in the way holy foolishness is represented in Danish cinema from the early cinematic era to the present day.

CARL THEODOR DREYER'S HOLY FOOLS

A preoccupation with religious themes was a common feature in early Danish cinema, and reached a climax with the career of the Copenhagen-born director Carl Theodor Dreyer (1889–1968). The theme of holy foolishness is a recurring issue in his films, and usually emerges at the point where various preoccupations in Dreyer's mind intersect. Throughout his work, the theme that incessantly surfaces in various forms, and across different genres, is the clash of the individual with deliberate or voluntary cruelty practised by his/her fellow humans.[32] It is related to a question that intensely preoccupied Dreyer: how man is led to intolerance.[33] His first feature film, *Leaves from Satan's Book* (1919), announces this theme: the four independent episodes of the film are linked by the motive of betrayal, taking as a prototype the biblical relation between Jesus and Judas. Tellingly, the following instances are set during the Spanish inquisition, the French Reign of Terror (1793–94), and the Russo-Finnish war (1918), each of which brings cruelty upon innocent people through the alliance of their trusted friends with a power structure, be it religious or political. The theme of power then features in various forms in most of his subsequent dramas: *Love One Another* (1922), *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928), *Day of Wrath* (1943), *The Word* (1955), *Gertrud* (1965), as well as in his comedies: *Parson's Widow* (1920), *Master of the House* (1925).

One theme directly related to intolerance and persecution is suffering which, when set in a religious context, can attain the intensity and drama of martyrdom, as in *The Passion of Joan of Arc*. The person who suffers is always an innocent, engaged in a moral fight which 'seeks first of all to eliminate the innocence, to engage it in the evil and make it admit to be evil'.[34] As with Tarkovsky and Bresson, the innocents in Dreyer's world are invariably weak, incapable or unwilling to provide any resistance by using force. In spite of this they are victors in another order of things. Their weakness leaves room for the manifestation of a kind of power that is mysteriously derived from a realm beyond the physical. Through these figures we can discern a force that is stronger than evil and in their behaviour its presence becomes manifest.

In this way, the suffering of the innocent becomes a means of deconstructing the powers of this world. Speaking about his *Day of Wrath*, Dreyer clearly states his intentions: 'I want to criticise the whole social structure of its time, of which the Church is just a part. . . . It is the cruelty and stupidity of the whole society which I want to show'.[35] This statement is as valid for all his

films, but criticism of the Church is only present in those films where action is set in a religious context. In order for his criticism to be effective he needs to launch his critique from a position of authority and impartiality. The character that is placed outside of and in opposition to the system, and derives his/her authority from his/her own spiritual power is the holy fool and, hence, Joan in *Joan of Arc* and Johannes in *The Word* are cast in this frame.

The theme of holy foolishness is naturally grafted onto Dreyer's Lutheran background. Both *Joan of Arc* and *The Word* deal with 'the irreconcilability born out of profound differences between the official religiosity, represented by Church as an agglutinating structure and the spontaneous religiosity, manifested without any external mediation', which is the hallmark of Protestant spirituality.[36] This corresponds both to an anticlericalism—not only inferred from Dreyer's works but also documented—and also a search for a spiritual reality through his cinematic discourse.[37] Kierkegaardian undertones are pronounced in both these aspects. The method that Dreyer deems ideal for the latter tendency is the 'abstraction'. He defines it as 'something that demands of the artist to abstract himself from reality in order to strengthen the spiritual content of his work'.[38] Dreyer's characters who bear the marks of holy foolishness all achieve this quality of abstraction from life since they seem to inhabit two worlds at the same time. By the will of the director, further replicated by the will of his holy fools, a new reality comes into being, as Dreyer explains: 'Abstraction will give him [the director] a chance of . . . replacing objective reality with his own subjective interpretation'.[39] The universe that is obtained has an 'intentional reality' in the sense that it is directed towards something different from itself; it is meant to reveal imperceptible presences beyond the limits of this world.[40]

THE PASSION OF JOAN OF ARC (1928)

It is striking that Dreyer needs to look abroad for a model holy fool, and as did Bresson, he found this in the hagiographical figure of Joan of Arc. Surprisingly for a silent film, *The Passion of Joan of Arc* manages to make reference to the theme of holy foolishness twice in its intertitles. First these bring into discussion the classical locus from St Paul's *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, which contrasts the wisdom of God with the foolishness of man. Reprimanded by her judges for her religious convictions: 'Don't you feel that these learned doctors are wiser than you? Joan replies: 'Yes . . . But God is even wiser.' In a second instance they suggest that her obstinate attitude verges on madness: 'The arrogance of this woman is insane', without giving her the benefit of real madness, which would have saved her from the stake. While they strive to convince her that what she claims is impossible, she knows that 'His [God's] ways are not our ways'. Throughout the trial Joan becomes the living proof of *docta ignorantia* (learned ignorance) and of a God who reveals Himself in the purity of one's heart. And indeed, Joan

manages to counter the sly traps that her judges devise for her by offering simplistic answers. If under Bresson's direction Joan is characterized by a simplicity of manner, in Dreyer's rendition she comes across as rather simple-minded.[41] While in Bresson's film the alert rhythm of questions and answers is suggested by quick successions of shots and reverse shots framing Joan from a distance, Dreyer makes the camera linger on Joan's suffering face in extreme close-ups, disclosing a confused, emotional and frightened figure rather than a cunning woman thinking on her feet.

In his preparations for the film, Dreyer made extensive use of the real records of the trial, which themselves bear out the threefold challenge that Joan, willingly or not, posed to her judges' authority: she is a woman but dressed in man's clothes; an illiterate who struggles to sign her name or remember her age, but who claims to have certain knowledge of God; and finally she is a lay person who claims to be the recipient and interpreter of divine messages. The film emphasizes the sexual politics of the trial on the one hand and the obstinacy with which Joan remains faithful to her own truth. At the intersection of the two stands Joan's passion or her 'martyrdom' as Dreyer has her say in one of the few lines that are not in the records.[42] While the historical figure was declared by the Catholic Church venerable (1903), beatified (1909) and canonized (1920) as a virgin, Dreyer is very keen to promote his protagonist as a martyr that is a sufferer and a confessor of her own faith. This innovation widens the gap between her and the Church by revealing irreconcilable spiritual visions.

Figure 6.1 Joan's suffering face at the stake. (*The Passion of Joan of Arc*)

Dreyer is interested in establishing a relationship between Joan and truth which for her is her inner spiritual voice.[43] This relation between truth and subjectivity is very close to the vision upheld by Kierkegaard. In contrast to her judges Joan is the subjective individual who 'has a foundation for the self that cannot be justified by appeal to the criteria embedded in the practices and discourses of the social establishment'.[44] She can only swear to the truth of her visions and she finally decides to remain faithful to them, in spite of the threat by her judges to use torture and to refuse her the Holy Communion. Apparently turning her face away from 'mother Church', she is left isolated and can only appear irrational from the outside. As with Kierkegaard's knight of faith, she is incapable of communicating her experience since it has no grounding outside of her own interiority. However, it is exactly this inwardness that Dreyer wants to capture on the screen. The innumerable close-ups are designed to venture beyond the skin, serving as a Protestant device that focuses on the individual's inner passion rather than on the institutional context.[45] In André Bazin's terms, the face becomes a 'privileged area of communication'.[46] By contrast, whereas the director focuses on Joan's inwardness, through the same technique of the close-ups he captures the grotesque physicality of her judges, depriving them not only of their names but also of any interiority beyond their grimaces. In spite of seeing themselves as the defenders and repository of truth, Dreyer hints that no truth inhabits them beside their sheer evilness and craftiness.

In positioning Joan as a fool in the eyes of the Church, Dreyer increases her critical power as an opponent of the established order. The opposition between Joan and her judges is also rendered in terms of the opposition between the oral and the written word. Using the classic Pauline distinction between the spirit and the letter, the scholars are seen as the representatives of the latter. In David Bordwell's words: 'Illiterate, she [Joan] is closed off from the written contract. Hers is the expressive, personalized word, an inspired speech opposed to the ossification of the written record, transcending the systems of political and religious exchange'.[47] Her judges are shown as interested in recording her answers and making her sign the recantation. Ultimately, they are depicted as trying to kill her spirit as a way to protect the established political and religious order. Even if apparently passive, by suffering all the evilness unleashed on her, Joan reveals all the monstrous coalition of the political and religious powers. The opening scroll announces the politics of the film: it presents the 'amazing drama' of a 'young pious woman confronted by a group of orthodox theologians and powerful judges'. Let us consider how Dreyer captures these relations in the scene that follows the defiant admission of one of the theologians that 'For me she is a saint', followed by his prostrating in front of her and his exit from the court. In contrast to previous scenes in which the camera represents the abstract viewer, here the shots suggest that the action is being watched through the eyes of a character—one of the few judges favourable to Joan. The camera shows a medium close-up of his face, cuts to the English captain speaking to his subordinate, both dressed in contemporary

army uniforms, then cuts to the judge who turns his head to watch behind. What he sees is suggested through a cut to the subordinate engaged in a verbal exchange with bishop Cauchon. The judge's attitude to their plotting is revealed through a cut to a close-up of his disapproving face. The sequence emphasizes the alliance between the religious and political authorities against the innocent, each of the two pursuing, with the assistance of the other, its own purposes. If the English authorities are motivated by a political interest, the French theologians would like to see her recant.

The chasm between Joan and the men of the Church suggested by the camerawork is then replicated in terms of passion (as living experience and ultimately martyrdom) and in their understanding of logos, or the word of God. Dreyer, following in Kierkegaard's footsteps, critiques a slippage from the Logos whereby the Logos is replaced by the logoi, or in other words God (the Word) is replaced by words about God. We sense that passion, as subjective experience, has become the test for truth. In a world in which competing truth-statements are making various claims to be the truth, Dreyer powerfully anchors Joan's claims in her own passion. By so doing, Dreyer brings the body into the foreground, establishing a confrontation between the body as pathos with the word as logos or as reason.[48] It is worth noting here that it is the female body that is subjected to suffering: an idea that will reemerge, literally or symbolically, in the work of other Danish directors. As for Dreyer, he suggests clearly that the passions render Joan Christ-like, not in the sense of a need to purify her body, but rather from a personal choice to share in His passions if this is the price to be paid for telling the truth.[49] Just as Christ was mocked as a foolish king, Joan is depicted being mocked by her wardens, in a faithful recreation of the famous icon of Christ in the Crown of Thorns.

Dreyer does not intend to create a period-drama reconstruction, obvious from the way in which he dresses the English soldiers in contemporary army clothes. Neither does he fashion his heroine in a way that caters for the taste of those who admired Joan for patriotic reasons; nor does he allow the riot that Joan's death causes be the last word on her sacrifice.[50] Dreyer concentrates on Joan's plight as she enters into conflict with the patriarchal order represented by the theologians, not because she could usurp their authority but because she transgresses the established order. In fact her beliefs are dogmatically orthodox. It is her spiritual experience and her wearing of male clothes that appear foolish and challenge the prescribed ways of divine communication and norms of dress. Without upholding any particular religious agenda, Dreyer is primarily interested in the issues surrounding subjectivity and the forces pitted against it.

ORDET/THE WORD (1955)

Dreyer's preoccupation with the tension between the individual of faith and the structures of power continued to be present in his work, as did his use of the holy fool as a vehicle for expressing this tension. In his *Ordet* (1955) the

plotline revolves around the Borgen family, with the issue of faith at the heart of the story, and the holy fool represented by Johannes. Anders, the youngest son of an old farmer Morten Borgen, asks for the hand of Anne, the daughter of Peter Petersen, and is refused because he belongs to a rival religious group. In addition to this blow to Morten's pride, a second one appears, grieving the whole family: Inger, the wife of Morten's second son Mikkel, dies in childbirth, in spite of the doctor's assurance that she is no longer in danger. This tragedy reconciles the Borgens and the Petersens who come to Inger's wake in order to bring Anne as her replacement. In the presence of everybody, including the priest, Johannes, Morten's third son, whom everybody believes to be mad, resurrects Inger at the request of little Maren, her daughter.

Adapting for the screen Kaj Munk's play, Dreyer draws an accurate picture of the different positions held in the Church of Denmark around Kierkegaard's time. The minister represents the established Church, which, under the influence of the Enlightenment ideas, had embraced a rational approach in matters of faith. Old Borgen, with his optimistic faith, had been conceived by Munk as a vehicle of the Grundtvigian ideas in opposition to the perceived gloomy Calvinist faith of Peter the Tailor.[51] Historically, the latter was professed by the Inner Mission. While Dreyer retains the sympathies that Munk had displayed towards both, and particularly towards Grundtvigianism, he is more interested in the question of intolerance rather than proving any of the parties right.[52] On the contrary, he showed them both falling short of a real understanding of faith. Outside these issues lie Inger, Johannes and little Maren. They appear to represent the core of true faith and operate beyond the doctrinal positions discussed above, being unable to distance themselves from faith sufficiently enough in order to engage rationally in theological arguments. Significantly, these characters stand for femininity, madness and childlikeness: perhaps the three ways Dreyer uses most to represent access to the divine. Apart from these characters, at the other end of the spectrum are Borgen's second son, Mikkel, who is an agnostic, and the doctor who treats Inger: a positivist who only believes in the 'miracles' performed by science.

The dialogue between these characters reveals a preoccupation with the (im)possibility of miracles, faith, and the position of reason. In Borgen's discussions with Inger, belief in miracles functions as a test for faith: 'But I prayed because I thought it was worth trying. If a father can't pray with faith for his child . . . miracles do not happen'. Miracles attest the possibility of the impossible and believing in them is tantamount to affirming the divine presence and intervention in this world. Borgen's distrustful 'Miracles no longer happen' is swiftly countered by Inger's 'Nothing is impossible for God if we pray to Him'. Furthermore, with Borgen's question reflecting on the condition of his son—'How can one tell madness from sense?'—he appears not only to be 'drawing nigh to God', as Johannes puts it, but also close to the central problem that the film poses in its presentation of Johannes. We see, in an extraordinary upending of expectations, that the

question of true faith comes to be explored through Johannes' madness. The attitude that each character holds towards him also defines their personal position on faith. Johannes is conceived as the mouthpiece of God, announcing His judgment of people's hearts: 'People believe in the dead Christ but not in the living one. They believe in the miracles two thousand years ago but they do not believe in me now.'

The comments provoked by Johannes's condition reveal much about the nature of the religious commitment that those around him have made. Borgen is incapable of seeing that Johannes is the reformer, the renewal of faith they have prayed for, because he no longer believes that prayers can be miraculously answered. In other words, his faith has lost the passion of subjectivity. Instead, Borgen blames the predicament of his son on too much deep reading of Kierkegaard. He fails to recognize any value in the diagnosis the philosopher-theologian reached about faith in the Church, in spite of it being similar to Johannes's own. In his turn, the pastor represents the rationalistic position that the official Lutheran church adopted after the Enlightenment: 'Naturally miracles are possible since God is the Creator but even if God can perform miracles he doesn't do so. They would break the laws of nature. God doesn't break His own laws'.

At the same time, the pastor is shown as having the mindset of a man of science, requiring empirical proof in order to believe, forgetting that the creed he professes is unverifiable and if verifiable it can no longer be a matter of belief:

Johannes: My name is Jesus of Nazareth.
Pastor: How can you prove that?

Dreyer shows his audience that the pastor suffers from the same lack of spiritual receptivity as Borgen, but this problem is made to seem more profound when voiced by a representative of the established Church. While Borgen tries to confine Johannes at home, the pastor is the first to suggest that Johannes should be institutionalized. Dreyer depicts representatives of the establishment as ready to discredit or stifle any alternative religious discourse. In the resurrection episode it is the pastor that reiterates the label of insanity, just as an apparently mentally recovered Johannes is ready to perform a miracle:

Borgen: Has your reason returned?
Johannes: Yes, my reason returned.
Johannes: Inger, you must rot because times are rotten.
Pastor: He is insane.
Johannes: Is it insane to want to save lives?

The pastor's reaction is more vehement than that of any other character. Even Mikkel, who is an atheist, is ready to embrace the miracle without

Figure 6.2 Johannes and Maren praying for Inger's resurrection. (*The Word*)

further questioning. He understands better than the pastor that a miracle is an event that cannot be explained because it belongs to another order of things. In this sense Dreyer's position is similar to Kierkegaard's regarding the limiting nature of rationalism. If it weren't for his *Joan of Arc,* one might say that Dreyer owes it to Munk, who drew heavily on Kierkegaard for the shaping of Johannes's character: He is the embodiment of true religion; he is in opposition to the institutional church; he has performed the necessary 'leap of faith'.[53] But Dreyer's long interest in such matters sustains the connection. The fact that Johannes's state is traced to his Kierkegaardian readings has wider implications, even if this direction of investigation has largely remained unexplored. Kierkegaard's sustained efforts to defamiliarise his readers with those Christian doctrines they took for granted is well known. Time and again he asserted the paradoxical nature of Christian truth: that it only appears reasonable from a position of faith, whereas from the outside it can only be perceived as madness. For this reason Christianity and madness appear coextensive, and radical sanctity takes the form of foolishness.

Kierkegaard's distinction between the aesthetic, moral and religious spheres can also be useful in discerning why the centre of gravity in Dreyer's film is found in holy foolishness. Given Dreyer's marked sympathy and interest in his female characters, Inger is usually taken to be the character who most merits the director's approval, striking the right balance between the intolerant attitudes of old Borgen and Peter on the one hand, and Johannes's religious mania on the other. In this interpretation she could

be the representative of an enlightened type of Christianity; a Christianity in which the heart soothes the disputes of the mind. Raymond Carney, for example, has argued that Johannes represents the 'abstract and abstracted prophet of biblical truths' in opposition to Inger's 'expressions of grace and love in the forms of the world and within the relationships of an actual family'.[54] From a slightly different perspective, David Bordwell expresses a disparaging opinion of Johannes the holy fool, stating that as long as he is mad he is incapable of working any miracles.[55]

I would like to suggest that, using a Kierkegaardian reading, it is not Inger but Johannes who primarily represents the religious sphere. Johannes inhabits this space up to the end of the film: even when he admits having recovered his reason he is still animated by the same uncompromising faith in the possibility of the impossible. In terms of narrative, there are two worlds that coexist from the very beginning. On the one hand there is the patriarchal saga with old Morten Borgen at the center trying to solve the problems that have arrived to ravage his family and failing systematically. On the other, there is the alternative universe of Johannes's madness. Given his liminal position between two worlds, the holy fool is ideally equipped to act as a mediator, a bridge between the two.[56] It is through Johannes and his foolishness that the presence of the Kingdom of God impinges on this world and this is manifested through Inger as the 'chosen site of the revelation'.[57] At the same time, it is through contact with Johannes that the different kinds of faith held by the various characters are revealed.

HOLY FOOLS AFTER DREYER: *BABETTE'S FEAST* (1987)

Dreyer achieved through his depiction of holy foolishness a critical edge that owed much to the influence of the Danish cultural debate about reason and the impact of Søren Kierkegaard. The resulting depictions of holy fools relied strongly on Christian settings, emphasizing the linkage with St Paul's dictum that faith in Christ is foolishness to the world. The religious context for representations of holy foolishness has continued in Danish cinema after Dreyer. In one of the more striking recent representations, the director Gabriel Axel has probed further the consequences of the Danish dichotomy between reason and folly. His *Babette's Feast* is a faithful adaptation of Isak Dinesen's eponymous novella, in which Axel allowed himself only a few moments of directorial license. The plot is relatively simple: the action is set in a pietistic community during the second half of the ninteenth century. The inspirational figure of the spiritual leader, the Dean, and his two extraordinarily beautiful daughters—named Philippa and Martine in remembrance of the religious reformers Philip Melanchthon and Martin Luther—detach themselves from the unadorned, grey context. As the story progresses, marital opportunities present themselves to the two girls in the persons of the young lieutenant Lorens Lowenhielm and the Parisian opera singer Achille Papin: the latter

also offering the promise of a successful musical career to Philippa. However, the girls reject the advances of their suitors in order to remain dedicated to their father's mission. Fifteen years later, after having dedicated their lives entirely to their father and then to the community, the sisters receive in their household a servant named Babette, Achille's 'Papist' friend, a political exile from France, who has lost both her husband and son in street protests. The story jumps forward a further twelve years when Babette, having won the lottery, insists on preparing and funding herself the dinner that is being held to commemorate the Dean. The dinner, a culinary feast, returns the phenomena of grace and forgiveness in the community, while Babette's identity is ultimately revealed: she was once a famous Parisian chef.

Axel departs from Dinesen's narrative on just a few occasions, out of which two instances are particularly significant, regarding the location of the action and the character of Babette. The first such instance attracts the viewer's attention from the very beginning. Originally, Isak Dinesen—the pen name of the Danish female writer Karen Blixen (1885–1962)—placed the action of her story in Norway. Gabriel Axel moves it to Jutland, the Danish region known as a hotbed of pietism and, incidentally, the ancestral homeland of Kierkegaard's family. This provided not only a more familiar environment for the Danish audience, but was also a more natural choice for the Kierkegaardian interpretations or polemics that Dinesen's prose invites us to consider.[58] Furthermore, it also facilitated the contrast between an extremely austere Protestant, disembodied spirituality, and a Catholic incarnated sacramentality.[59]

Strikingly, the theme that frames the story is 'the possibility of the impossible'. It is a variation on the Kierkegaardian idea discussed above, but with polemic undertones. Incapable of expressing his most ardent desire, Lowenhielm explains his haste and definitive departure to Martina by saying in a resigned voice that 'in this world there are things which are impossible'. Returning after many years to the sisters' house in order to take part in the commemorative dinner and confront his past decisions, he is the one for whom the feast prompts the greatest revelation. Martine is returned in an unexpected way to him, 'if not in the flesh, which means nothing, in spirit, which is all. . . . For tonight I have learned, dear sister, that in this world anything is possible.' In the same way, the deferred reality of the celestial kingdom is sacramentally granted to those members of the community who share in Babette's 'eucharistic' feast.[60] Not even in the enthusiasm that animated them when the Dean was alive were his followers experiencing a foretaste of the Kingdom. Evoked in hymns, 'Jerusalem, my happy home/ name ever dear to me' was never hoped for in this world. But, with Babette's feast, for the first time, 'Mercy and truth have met together; righteousness and bliss have kissed one another,' in an apparent actualization of the messianic times.

Babette has been typically seen as a 'universal type for innocent suffering'[61] and a Christ-figure[62] rather than a holy fool figure. This could

be partially due to the restrained style that Axel professed for most of the film. However, the feast that Babette prepares is in stark contrast with all other episodes in the film. The emphasis is clearly not on the golden mean of Lutheran virtues but on overflowing abundance of the feast and divine grace: an excess that baffles human expectations. This lack of moderation is advocated in the manner expressed by Kierkegaard, who explained that 'the corrective exaggeration will not lead to the virtue of moderation but rather the scandal of the absurd'.[63]

While sharing in the characteristics of the Christ figure, Babette is also fashioned as a holy fool. Gabriel Axel adds a few touches to her portrayal which emphasize the radical character of her meekness and selfless sacrifice. In order to achieve this he omits the biographical details present in Dinesen's account regarding her past as a communard, and Axel also tones down the remarks pointing to her artistic ego. At the same time, as in Tarkovsky's *Andrei Rublev*, the artist and the holy fool are conflated in order to bestow on human creation a liturgical dimension. The cry of the artist 'Give me the chance to do my very best' is answered with the opportunity to once again make possible the realization of personal talent and its transformation into a free gift.

To illustrate this detachment from social norms, Babette is a destitute foreigner, a 'Papist', which renders her an outsider to the Lutheran community by virtue of her ethnicity, faith and values. Without being eccentric in a blatant way, she appears, in her stylish dress and boots, at odds with the plain clothes advocated in the community. A great culinary artist, she effaces herself by hiding her gifts and choosing to live incognito in the remote Danish village even after she is given the possibility to leave and start a new life. For years, it is her humble devotion that ensures that food is cooked for the sick and the needy, and which frees Martine and Philippa from their daily chores in order that they can dedicate themselves to the community. And when the time comes she sacrifices all her possessions, without expecting anything in return. The gesture seems even more extravagant as she is not in any way liable to the moral norms of the community.

In exchange, Babette arouses popular suspicions that she is preparing a 'black sabbath': an arraignment similar to that which the Byzantine holy fools faced as a result of the scandal they created. In contrast with the kind of spirituality promoted by the Dean and his daughters, Babette's manifests itself in a transgressive and excessive manner through her challenge to the austere principles of the community. This disruption of the established order, apparently produced by 'irrational' forces, is necessary in order to allow the irruption of the divine. The freely given love and forgiveness that Babette displays disrupts the surrounding economy of scarcity which has starved the community of a connection to the transcendent.[64] It is Babette's self-sacrifice that provides a sharp critique of the failings of the society around her. As Lorens explains, she has the skills to turn a dinner into a kind of 'love affair that made no distinction between bodily appetite and spiritual appetite.' As a true love it is self-giving and once again, as in Joan of Arc, it is 'ultimately

the woman's own body that is offered up, in displaced form, through her Eucharistic culinary corpus', symbolized by the *Cailles en sarcophages*.[65] The underlying feminist undertone that is present in Dinesen is also taken over by Axel.

There is an even more fundamental way in which Babette is disruptive. She reverses the paradigm of spiritual power: The male spirituality embodied by the Dean and then replicated in his daughters through their strict obedience to his words is hierarchical, and exalts the virtue of submission to the paternal founding figure of the community. In Pierre Bourdieu's terms it can be described as 'symbolic power', as imposed by the dominant figure of the father and internalized by his subordinate daughters. As such, it is accompanied by a kind of 'symbolic violence', exercised by the person in authority through a kind of coercion that is not made explicit.[66] The community manifests the same submission to the word and memory of the Dean, perpetuated within the religious community by his daughters. As the narrator's voice informs us, the small community gathered regularly in the house of the sisters 'to read and interpret the Word and to honour the spirit of their master'. Significantly, while the two sisters are dedicated to the ministry of the word, Babette attends to the bodily needs of the community. In opposition to the sisters' spirituality based on the word, or the logos—both capital and lower-case—Babette's spirituality is exercised from a position that lacks symbolic power and legitimizes itself just through an extravagant self-sacrifice which is expressed in material terms. These different visions are structured on oppositions that not only pit Catholic against Protestant, and male against female, but also power against weakness.

BREAKING THE WAVES (1996)

If Axel looked back in time to explore the relationship between reason and folly, more recently the Danish director Lars von Trier has set the same issue in a very modern context.[67] In von Trier's *Breaking the Waves* the issues of religion and faith are the driving force behind the story. Bess is a devout young girl from a puritan Calvinist community in Scotland who marries an outsider, Jan, who works on an oilrig. Devastated by his long absences while working on the oilrig, she continually prays that he returns home. Her prayer is answered in a cruel way, for it is a terrible accident at work that returns him to her, now paralyzed from head down: a catastrophe for which she now feels responsible. With no hope of recovery, he wants her to continue with her life and asks her to have relationships with other men as a way to cure his own sense of guilt. Hesitant, Bess does what she is told, in the process attracting opprobrium and ostracism from her family and community. As Jan's condition deteriorates, she risks and then sacrifices her life by venturing onto a ship notorious for the violence of the sailors towards women. Jan miraculously recovers after her death, saves her body from a

shameful burial and delivers it to the sea from the oilrig. The final shot of the film vindicates her self-sacrifice, showing in a divine setting a pair of bells tolling for her in the sky.

There is some controversy over von Trier's intention here: one reservation over his genuine interest in religious questions stems from whether his use of religion is merely a dramatological tool designed to aid the narrative conventions of melodrama and sentimentality.[68] A closer inspection of von Trier's manuscript for the film, however, shows that it underwent several revisions, and evolved significantly in terms of the narrative details and the characterological depiction of Bess. At an initial stage in the drafting the main female character, then named Caroline, lived a conventional life in a European capital, as mother to a child and married to a language professor. This initial heroine was not particularly religious and manifested a rather perverted sexuality in her encounters with men after her husband became disabled. The redrafting suggests that von Trier added religious elements in at a later stage for functional reasons, as a means to enhance the conflict and criticize social conventions.[69]

Von Trier does not himself exclude the conscious manipulation of religious elements as part of a director's work: '. . . if you want to create a melodrama, you have to furnish it with certain obstacles. And religion provided me with a suitable obstacle'.[70] At the same time he makes it clear that, without being an introduction to religion, *Breaking the Waves* is an expression of his own religiosity.[71] At the time von Trier liked to declare himself a Catholic.[72] However, it would be a mistake to view von Trier as a traditional Catholic producing a directorial vision informed by his religious affiliation. His writings indicate that religion offered him a sense of both belonging and of defiance: the latter directed toward his bourgeois atheist family and their convention-free lifestyle. The emphasis falls on the defiance that it means to be a practicing Catholic in modern Denmark. His religiosity functions in a Christian framework, but as he states, it is essentially 'humanistic', very much in the vein of Dreyer, in the sense that 'Religion is accursed, but not God'.[73] This transgressive religiosity is transparent in his works around that time.

The character of Beth in *Breaking the Waves* is so intriguing that it has given rise to several controversies and conflicting interpretations. In what follows I will propose an interpretation of her as a holy fool, which arguably explains more fully her character than the already contested interpretations of Bess as martyr and saint. I will situate myself on the side of a feminist critique that proposes her madness as a vessel for free expression and female subjectivity, and will suggest that, rather than being an ideological victim of a male-dominated society, she is the victor in the film. Drawing from a model of holy foolishness established in Danish cinema, Bess exposes and critiques, from her twice disadvantaged position as a mentally unstable woman, the inherent violence that lurks within the established order—be it religious or secular.

As Irena Makarushka points out, when criticizing different perceptions of Bess, she is 'neither a tragic nor saintly heroine.' Looking at her through the feminist lens offered by Louise J. Kaplan, who argues that submission and purity are culturally encoded expectations that function as constraints on women, Makarushka extends Bess's unique situation to the majority of women 'caught between two patriarchal paradigms: the virgin and the whore'.[74] I would like to suggest that Bess would be better and more effectively defined as a holy fool. It is in this capacity that we understand more completely the challenge that she poses to the patriarchal order represented by the elders of the community and the social order. From the marginalised position of someone who is female, mentally unstable and married to an outsider, she threatens to destabilize the system with her unconventional views and actions. The static interpretation of the law by the church elders—which denote here the rational and the ethical—stand in stark contrast with Bess's more dynamic, existential interpretation. In fact, Bess develops a threefold attack on the established order: aesthetic, ethical and religious. Aesthetically, her secular and religious preferences are at odds with the norms of her community: She likes the music of the outsiders including Jan and his group of friends, and the chiming of the bells which have been banned by the elders but which she hopes to reinstate one day. Ethically, she breaches the law of submission to the elders of the community, posing a threat to social stability. She not only behaves as a sexual being in private but she creates a sexual scandal in public. She also challenges directly the theological foundations of the Calvinist faith of the community, opposing their static veneration of the Word as the letter of the Bible with an existential dedication to the embodied Word and the immediate consequences this has for human relationships: 'You cannot be in love with a word. You can love another human being. That's perfection', she says. The effrontery is reinforced as Bess asserts herself not only as a voice in a community where women are supposed to be silent, but also as one who has theological opinions. Like Dreyer, von Trier draws on the Pauline subversion of human reason by divine folly. In a similar way to Joan of Arc who is illiterate, Bess has a learning disability which causes others to dismiss her wisdom, and yet her opinions are a stumbling block to the elders' theological knowledge.

Bess also provides a challenge for secular rationality to the extent that her 'madness' cannot be contained and the categories conventionally used to define it fail. From the point of view of a society privileging reason, and all the reason-based virtues, Bess's excessive sensibility needs to be repressed. On two occasions institutionalization is suggested as the best way to deal with Bess's excessive feelings: first when her brother dies and later when she is trying to save Jan by prostituting herself. Von Trier shows his audience that Bess's strength springs from her heart rather than her mind, which shortcuts the rational categories of understanding. Dr Richardson—who can be seen as 'a symbol for the kind of rational, white, middle-class masculinity'—when asked during the court investigation into her death

about his diagnosis, replies that Bess suffers from 'being good' but withdraws it later as an assessment that cannot be verified by empirical science.[75] In a previous episode when the Doctor tries to reason with Bess, pointing out that she is fulfilling the desires of a husband mentally disturbed by his illness, he is extremely irritated by her explanation that, to make up for her stupidity, she has a gift from God to believe.

The biblical prototype for such a heroine is Mary Magdalene—whom Bess herself mentions in her defence—but she also resembles Sonia Marmeladova in Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* (1866): the latter being a literary model for the coexistence of sanctity and sinfulness, an idea which appeals particularly to Russian sensibility. This idea, however, can be itself traced back to the antics of the Byzantine holy fools, which play with the same discrepancy between essence and appearance. One sequence in particular suggests Bess's striking affinities with these fools. In a suggestive red mini-skirt, her top torn and her hair disheveled, she is walking her bike up the hill to church, crying, while the village children are following. The shots change from medium long to medium as the children draw near and start throwing stones at her, calling her a 'tart'. When she finally collapses in front of the church, the priest appears, dismisses the children but abandons her, not daring to break the rules of the community that has ostracized her for her scandalous behaviour. The difference, itself transgressive, is that whereas the scandal produced by the hagiographic holy fools is based on a misunderstanding of their acts, for women such as Sonia or Bess their physical defilement is real. In the first case the moral is that God's judgments are inscrutable for humans.[76] In the latter, a suspension of the ethical is necessary.

Viewing Bess as a holy fool adds a further layer to the criticism of the status quo, which is not invalidated by the arguments advanced by most

Figure 6.3 Bess is mocked and stoned by the children. (*Breaking the Waves*)

feminist interpretations. Alyda Faber reads the film within a theoretical framework offered by Julia Kristeva and Katharine MacKinnon, in which patriarchy has no real transgressive 'outside' and, therefore, any act of abjection ultimately results in strengthening the male social dominance as rational power: 'This common recreation of femininity as weakness . . . recreates male power over against feminine power as fascinating debility'. [77] What is at stake here is the idea of power, worldly power and how it could be distributed genderwise. The holy fools break open the mechanism of power—and in Bess's case this mechanism of power is most violently inscribed on her body—but they will not constitute themselves as a pole of power on the same level with that they oppose. The critical function of holy fool is directed against power structures but not from a similar position of power which would neutralize such a critique. The 'outside' then becomes radical 'outsideness', revealing a tension between this world and the other world.

In fact, what the film suggests through Bess is non-conformity to those laws endorsed by the power structures. She follows her own ideas of what goodness is, but in so doing she is confronted with the boundaries imposed by society. She is a woman of independent mind when it comes to interpreting religious injunctions and she assumes them existentially to the last consequences. Her deeds can only be said to be self-destructive to the extent that she obstinately pursues her aim. But at no point is the harm self-inflicted. The violence is lurking out there, threatening the vulnerable at any time and its manifestation is itself a condemnation of the social system from which it emerges. From a perspective that advocates the empowerment of the weak Bess's sacrifice cannot be effective. However, it points to a solution that suggests the disempowerment of the powerful. Bess, therefore, stands in a tradition that aligns foolishness and weakness and reveals God as the ultimate deconstructor of the powers that be, 'because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.' (1 Cor 1:25)

This suffering is not required by God but by those power structures mimicking his authority. The true voice of God is only heard at the conclusion of the film in the bells chiming and his agency is apparent in what appears to be Bess's assumption into heaven. It does not serve to validate the means Bess has used to achieve her ends, but rather as a commendation of the love that inspires Bess to achieve her purpose regardless. From Bess's point of view carrying out Jan's wishes at any cost is a way in which she can express her love for him. Even if from the outside it seems grossly misguided, this certainly does not render Bess's sacrifice valueless. Kierkegaard offers insights that can prove useful in settling the controversies raised by Bess's sacrifice, and can help us understand von Trier's depiction. The first point refers to an understanding of suffering as 'the qualitative expression of disparity [of man] with this world'.[78] When applied to Bess, whose fondness for excess points towards the proportions of this disparity, it demonstrates that a clash with the power structures of this world is inevitable. The greater the disparity, the greater the pressure exercised on the individual; at the same time, the

more exposed becomes the inherent violence in the repressive system.[79] The clash happens, however, in the terms of Bess's own personality and specific situation, hence the idiosyncratic character of her experience.

ADAM'S APPLES (2005)

The most recent tendency in Danish cinema has been to explore religious questions in thoroughly unconventional ways. From Dreyer to von Trier and Anders Thomas Jensen, the transition is not only one from auteur films to genre films but also to increasingly more ambiguous, if not irreverent, approaches to religion.[80] This irreverence does not slip into hostility but rather expresses an ambivalent attitude, allowing space for viewers to form their own judgments. Jensen's black comedy *Adam's Apples* illustrates this tendency: its disrespectful humor being no obstacle for reading it as 'a tongue-in-cheek parable about redemption, unselfishness, and faith'.[81] On the contrary, as in *The Word*, *Breaking the Waves* or *Babette's Feast*, it can be seen as proposing an alternative narrative enunciation, in this case supporting a reading of a supernatural world impinging on the everyday one.[82] This becomes apparent in retrospect, competing with the first enunciation but not necessarily contesting it. This second reading is not forced on the text but rather proposed as a matter of choice—a choice to believe.

The storyline is relatively straightforward: a neo-Nazi ex-convict, Adam, is released on condition that he does community service at the church ministered by Ivan, a staunch believer in human goodness. 'There are no evil people' he tells Adam during their first official encounter. This intrigues Adam from the very beginning, who then endeavours to make Ivan realize the contrary using a variety of often disturbingly brutal ways. This proves to be extremely difficult since Ivan ascribes all the misfortunes to Satan. As is later revealed, Ivan's brain blocks out memories of being molested as a child by his father and of his wife having committed suicide as a result of giving birth to a child with Down's syndrome. He refuses to acknowledge any misbehaviour on the part of Adam or the other two convicts under his care: Khalid, a Pakistani burglar who occasionally holds up petrol stations as a form of political protest, and Gunnar, an alcoholic kleptomaniac convicted of rape. Strange coincidences such as the Bible repeatedly falling on the floor and opening at the Book of Job, or an ongoing plague affecting the tree whose apples Adam is supposed to use for making a pie as part of his rehabilitation programme, make him even more aggressive, but they also erode his confidence to such an extent that ultimately he experiences a complete change of heart. The pastor's tactics seem to have been effective—not in the sense of miraculously reforming the ex-convicts—but by keeping their destructive inclinations to a minimum. Turning a blind eye to their weaknesses is a way of showing tolerance and understanding: "If we listen to reason all the time the world would be a gloomy place", the minister says.

He tries to ease the conscience of a former Nazi officer, whose inhuman behaviour in the concentration camp comes to haunt him on his death bed. The notions of divine retribution and justice are blatantly rejected in favour of mercy and forgiveness.

The radical and unflinching nature of Ivan's faith makes him appear a fool to those embedded in the conventions of the modern world. *Adam's Apples* can be read as a film about the very possibility of faith in a world in which innocent people are confronted with deeply traumatic events. Its theodicy is very simple and it seems to offer a way of coming to terms with such traumas: if the evils in the world are not God's doing, and the only possibility of retaining faith in people is to affirm their fundamentally good nature, then it follows that all negative agency is from the devil and should be interpreted as trials to be overcome. Ivan takes this to such an extreme that he denies factual reality. This rhetoric of exaggeration is very similar to Kierkegaard's hyperbolic understanding of love in 1 Cor 13:7: 'To believe all things means precisely, even though love is not apparent, even though the opposite is seen to presuppose that love is nevertheless present fundamentally, even in the misguided, even in the corrupt, even in the hateful'.[83]

The boundaries between madness and holy foolishness are therefore blurred, as in many other representations discussed so far. In *Adam's Apples* the scientific explanation for the minister's constant goodness and inability to see evil is apparently due to a brain tumor. The final irony of the film seems to stand this explanation on its head. After Ivan's 'miraculous' recovery, a result of the tumor inadvertently being removed by a bullet shot by Adam's neo-Nazi friends, he continues to function as the same person and, in an even more baffling twist, Adam decides to assist Ivan in his work with the convicts. More than with any other holy fool analysed so far, Ivan carries here the banner of otherness. He implicitly upholds the right to be different and proposes an alternative to the dominant ideology, as regards both to the rehabilitation system for the criminals and the belief in the corruption of human nature. Significantly, the alternative is not predicated on self-gratification but on self-sacrifice.

In line with the iconoclastic turn in Danish cinema Ivan's foolishness is treated in a comic vein dictated by the rules of the genre. This is facilitated by the rhetoric of exaggeration previously mentioned which is here put to comic effect. This does not, however, undermine the seriousness of the situation. Ivan's blind faith in the goodness of people is as uncompromising as Adam's opposite belief. If Ivan denies all that may be described as evil in reality, Adam denies all that is good, trying to expose it as make-believe. In so doing he thinks that he has realism and science as his allies. Yet Adam's universe is continuously disturbed by the puzzle with which he is presented in the person of the minister as well as the bizarre coincidences for which he cannot find a rational explanation. As we have seen in other Danish cinematic treatments of holy foolishness, the idea of the impossible becoming possible is a critical theme, creating a permeable crack in a universe

otherwise impervious to the divine presence. The possibility of an alternative spiritual reading insinuates itself when a miraculous event happens in relation to the 'impossible' and casts a fresh perspective on the whole narrative. This poses a challenge to the viewer by requiring a 'leap of faith' into a different interpretation.

We have seen from this analysis of the representation of holy foolishness in Danish cinema the powerful influence of Kierkegaard as well as Danish cultural debate over the nature of folly and reason. The holy fool figure, therefore, has been developed by directors, often in an unambiguously religious context, as part of a critique of the established order and its understanding of faith. There is a significant gendered dimension here. All three female holy fools analysed above share a common trait: their determination to assume their self-sacrifice as an integral part of their existence, aware of its redeeming value. They enter into conflict with the norms around them while following a decision that springs from their own 'heart' rather than from any conventional morality. While their suffering in confrontation with the forces that oppose them is willingly assumed, it exposes and criticizes the injustice and violence at the foundation of many existing religious and social orders, to which women are particularly vulnerable. It can be said that although the bodies of the female fools are destroyed—either physically in the case of Joan and Bess, or metaphorically in the case of Babette—they also help to deconstruct the kind of power that exerts itself through the aggression of the individual. These female holy fools offer a glimpse into a world that heralds the advent of an yet impossible justice, which overturns our axiological preconceptions.

At the same time the male holy fools—Johannes and Ivan—enact the possibility of the same world of the impossible and the miraculous, revealing a leap of faith that seems foolish to the outside world. In the case of Johannes, his criticism of an order that falls short of faith—in the form of the established church, dissident pietism, or modern secular ideology—is delivered both through his prophetic words and the miracle he performs at the end. With Ivan, given the collection of misfits that surround him, his trust in the inherent goodness of human nature creates the possibility of the manifestation of the supernatural and also the rehabilitation of socially irredeemable individuals. Ultimately, the otherwordly representation of the holy fool in Danish cinema is used to unveil all that is askew with the world and point towards the possible existence of a better universe.

NOTES

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7 Idiocy as Technique: The Dogme 95 Movement

> Idiots are the people of the future.
>
> Stoffer, *The Idiots*

'They are searching for their inner idiot' proclaims Stoffer, the commune's ideologue, explaining to the novice Karen the bizarre acts of his mates who seem to have temporarily parted with their faculty of reason. This pronouncement from Lars von Trier's *The Idiots* (1998) has an uncanny resemblance with the reply that the 'saintly anchoret' Piteroum was given by the female monastic community he was visiting in the fourth century: 'We have an idiot within'. The holy man was searching for a woman that an angel had praised—intriguingly—as greater than himself. This story is recorded by Palladius in his *Lausiac History*, written in 419–420 AD, and presents us with perhaps the first female holy idiot figure in the monastic literature of the early church. Michel de Certeau interprets the 'within' mentioned by the nuns as ambiguously designating both a physical space—the monastery—and an inner space, by which he means 'our innermost secret, a madness within ourselves'.[1] If Palladius's nun represents the idiocy that unsettles the neat organization of our social lives, can we recognize similar impulses towards foolishness in Danish cinema's most famous brand: Dogme 95?

Although the tradition of using holy fools as critical voices by Danish directors has been well established, the group of directors associated with the Dogme 95 movement revisited the concept of idiocy, transforming the figure into a modern countercultural character. Inspired by Lars von Trier, this cinematic movement has developed an influential and international dimension, frequently using the critical device of the fool as a way of expressing their dissatisfaction with contemporary culture and filmmaking. Through von Trier's obsession with the concepts of idiocy and the outcast, the movement has brought to life a peculiarly modern form of the fool bearing a cinematic function that transcends national boundaries and religious traditions. This chapter will trace the vestiges of this madness within the Danish Dogme 95 cinematic movement and ask about the significance of this rediscovery of the idiot figure: to what extent can we read this rediscovery not only

as a form of societal critique but also as carrying a transcendental value? In order to investigate this phenomenon, I will proceed with an outline of Dogme 95 as a countercultural movement and offer an analysis of its manifesto. I will suggest that the behaviour of Lars von Trier, the principal initiator of the movement, and the manifesto lend themselves to an interpretation that falls within the holy fool phenomenology. To illustrate this argument I will then offer an evaluation of the Dogme 95 film canon to demonstrate the significance of the figure of the fool and its functions.

Dogme 95 has proved to be a prolific enterprise and powerfully influential well beyond the sphere of Danish cinema. Up to four waves of filmmakers have been identified who have chosen to work within the rigours imposed by the manifesto.[2] The initial brethren of Danish directors released their Dogme films between 1998 and 2000: Thomas Vinterberg: *Festen/ The Celebration* (1998), Lars von Trier: *Idioterne/The Idiots* (1998), Søren Kragh-Jacobsen: *Mifunes sidste sang/ Mifune* (1999) and Kristian Levring: *The King is Alive* (2000). A second wave followed, with new Danish directors working within the constraints imposed by the Dogme manifesto, the first film being Lone Scherfig's *Italiensk for begyndere/ Italian for Beginners* (2000). By this time the movement had taken on an international dimension, and a third wave developed with directors inside and outside Europe experimenting with the project. A fourth offspring is represented by those directors who have been loosely inspired by the project but do not follow the manifesto.[3] It is worth noting that the first Dogme films were issued with a certificate of authenticity, but in 2002 the secretariat of the movement was dissolved, ostensibly due to the fact that 'the manifesto of Dogme 95 has almost grown into a genre formula, which was never the intention. As a consequence we [. . .] are therefore closing the Dogmesecretariat'.[4] However, this has only resulted in the dissolution of the institutionalized form of Dogme 95. From thenceforth, the director himself was at liberty to decide whether he/she had made a Dogme film, without needing to obtain sanction from a higher authority.

Moving outside any form of control, Dogme 95 has become a virtually open franchise since any director could now make a Dogme film by choosing to follow some or all the rules. Since it is beyond the scope of this project to assess the achievements of every Dogma production, I will proceed by analyzing the founding documents—the 'Manifesto' together with the 'Vow of Chastity'—and I will refer afterwards to the films made by the four Danish 'father figures' behind the movement. Reference to other films will depend on two criteria: their aesthetic quality and the extent to which the contents of the film conform to the interests of this exploration of holy foolishness. The underlying assumption here is that, in spite of the apparent emphasis of the 'Manifesto' on the technicalities of the filmmaking, the impulse behind Dogma 95 is not a strictly formal one. This is in line with von Trier's claim that following the rules does not automatically lead to a meaningful result.[5] As von Trier does not conceptualise the nature of this

imponderable he is seeking, my aim will be to determine the significance it bears for him and the Dogme 95 project.

In what follows I will proceed by analyzing the different aspects at play in determining the significance of Dogma 95 movement for the figure of the holy fool in film. In addition to the cinematic texts, the movement, in the best avant-garde tradition, provides us with a written manifesto which gives voice to their dissatisfactions as well as stating their creed. My aim throughout the chapter will be twofold: first, to highlight the affinities between the impetus behind the Dogma 95 and the provocative behaviour of the holy fool, and second to analyse the trope of idiocy as it appears in some of the cinematic products of the movement and how this is used to challenge the status quo.

THE MANIFESTO

The Dogme 95 manifesto was not the first constructed by Lars von Trier. Almost all his early work was prefaced or accompanied by manifestoes.[6] However, the Dogme 95 manifesto stands out as by far the most influential for the history of modern cinema as a result of the popularity it has enjoyed among film-makers. It was co-authored with Thomas Vinterberg but it was von Trier who announced it, together with the so-called 'Vow of Chastity', on March 20, 1995 in the Odeon Cinema in Paris at the international symposium '*Le cinéma vers son deuxième siècle*', on the centennial anniversary of the Lumières' primary cinema screening in the French capital.[7] As acknowledged in Jesper Jargil's documentary *De Lutrede/The Purified* (2002) by Vinterberg, the manifesto was intended as a 'political statement'. Couched as a 'rescue action', it was meant to describe the predicament of the old cinema, proclaim its death, and pave the way for the rise of a new one, capable of fulfilling what, in the opinion of the authors, were the still unachieved aspirations of the 1960s.

The new vision provided by the manifesto was stark and challenging. From the very beginning, the document expresses its oppositional stance, stating that its goal is to counter 'certain tendencies' in contemporary cinema. It then moves forward taking as a point of reference the year 1960. In this year an attempt was made to escape from the supposed staleness of mainstream filmmaking, but without result since 'the goal was correct but the means were not!' Individualism and freedom created fresh works for a while but without substantive changes to the format and technique of filmmaking. Because the theories of cinema, so von Trier suggested, were based on 'bourgeois' principles, the purported anti-bourgeois cinema had morphed into the bourgeois. Particularly arraigned by von Trier was the *auteur* concept. By contrast, Dogme 95 is not individualist. Technological progress, he argues, has made possible the 'ultimate democratization of cinema'. Under these new circumstances, the role of the avant-garde becomes

even more important. Therefore, Dogme 95 announces the introduction of a new set of rules known as the 'Vow of Chastity', designed to counter individualism by 'putting our films into uniform'.

The manifesto continues with a second line of criticism, bringing into discussion another failure of the generation working in the 1960s: they did not put an end to the malign 'cosmetic' movement in film. On the contrary, since that time the use of cosmetic effects has exploded, with the result that the audience is now tricked into believing illusions via those emotions which are communicated through the free choice of the individual artist. The next point to be criticized is superficial action due to the predictability embedded in traditional dramaturgical practices. Frequently, the manifesto argues, the plot is not justified though the character's inner lives. The result of these failures was an 'illusion of pathos and an illusion of love'. But, what was really at stake here in Vinterberg and von Trier's viewpoint was the elimination of truth from cinema, as a result of those illusions that had been made possible by new technologies. Under these circumstances the Dogma 95 movement took it upon themselves to counter these tendencies through a new set of rules called the 'Vow of Chastity', which takes the form of ten commandments, out of which seven refer to modes of production and only three (6–8) to the intrinsic characteristics of the film. The commandments are: 1. Shooting must be done on location; 2. The sound must never be produced apart from the images or vice versa; 3. The camera must be hand-held; 4. The film must be in color. Special lighting is not acceptable; 5. Optical work and filters are forbidden; 6. The film must not contain superficial action; 7. Temporal and geographical alienation are forbidden; 8 Genre movies are not acceptable; 9. The film format must be Academy 35 mm; 10. The director must not be credited.[8] In a direct continuation from the last commandment, the final passage in the 'Vow' contained the pledge of the director to 'refrain from personal taste' and also to 'refrain from creating a "work" as I regard the instant as more important than the whole'. The supreme goal was to 'force the truth out of the characters and settings' at the 'cost of any good taste and any aesthetic considerations'.

At the time this manifesto was launched, the Dogme 95 brethren also included Søren Kragh-Jacobsen and Kristian Levrig, but von Trier can safely be credited with the paternity of the idea following a series of earlier challenges he had set himself. After exploring a whole range of technical virtuosities in his earlier films, especially in the trilogy *Europa—The Element of Crime* (1984), *Epidemic* (1987) and *Europa* (1991)—he had reached a point where he felt he 'couldn't get any further' using technical cinematography.[9] When technical progress stagnates, one possibility of renewal is by returning to the primitive. The return to the most basic techniques of filmmaking advocated by von Trier can be seen as an attempt to avoid mannerisms at the level of technique. At the same time, von Trier pointed towards a more profound reason for this move, it being a 'question of liberating oneself from the inconsequential, in order to be able to focus on the

essential'.[10] The following section of the chapter will try to establish the nature of this 'essential' and its relation to holy folly by taking into account the intentions of Dogme 95 as expressed in its founding documents and the cinematic products inspired by its rules.

FOOLISHNESS AND DOGME 95

Von Trier's religiosity is no less unconventional than his film-making. In an interview given in 1982 von Trier spoke of his wish to make religious films and defined what he understood by religiosity: 'religiosity is a lot about being able to seek out the essentials in life'.[11] At the same time, in his personal viewpoint, religion appeared to overlap with goodness even if its ties with traditional morality were limited.[12] This is important because von Trier's characters, with the exception of Bess, are not seen as openly professing any religion. Goodness, von Trier suggests, is a manifestation of religiosity and in this sense Karen's goodness in his *The Idiots*, to which I will refer later, can be seen as an expression of her religiosity.

A few observations are necessary here about the affinities that von Trier's public persona, if not his personality, has with the holy fool. The 'provocateur' label has been attached many times to Lars von Trier in connection with his unorthodox public appearances or the latent provocations contained in his works. The Dogme 95 movement has been just one of many such instances. Like the holy fool's ascetic practices, this provocation is designed first for his own development, and only secondarily for his audience.[13] It is never gratuitous. In common with the holy fool type von Trier thrives in situations of controversy and scandal, which are superficially taken as publicity stunts.[14] Moreover, there are points of similarity in terms of aesthetics: In an interview given in 1982, one year before his graduation from the Danish Film School, Lars von Trier saw the aesthetic of the ugly as his forte and his mission.[15] In the light of this, von Trier's professed Catholicism, in spite of his statements, seems grafted onto a sensibility that was resolutely Protestant (in the sense of being iconoclastic and eschewing the beauty of holiness), certainly by the time he was involved in Dogme 95.

These characteristics were continued in the movement von Trier initiated. A useful approach to understanding the connection with holy foolishness comes from the cultural theorist and slavist Mikhail Epstein. He highlights the affinities between the avant-garde and holy foolery in its Russian manifestation, to the point that he defines the former as a 'religious phenomenon'.[16] Epstein has in mind the particular case of the conceptual artist, but his argument is fashioned in such a way that makes it applicable to avant-garde movements in general. He draws various parallels between the avant-garde and holy foolery based on the anti-aesthetical perspective each promotes, and particularly the moral and religious

implications of holding such views. The thrust of his argument lies in discovering the same impetus for self-denial that lies behind both avant-garde art and holy foolery. As might be expected, institutional religion is not a key dimension here, given the nature of avant-garde movements, which are typically represented as iconoclastic and anti-traditionalist. Epstein argues, however, that in spite of not expressing any explicit religious content, the avant-garde is acting upon a premise that is essentially religious: the self-humiliation of art as a religious act. This self-denial is symbolically predicated upon an imitation of a divine model in which 'Art becomes impoverished, pathetic in order to partake of God's fate, to follow his path of degradation and mockery'.[17]

This aspect of self-denial plays an important role in the Dogme 95 manifesto. It refers both to the director and his/her art. The first reference is made in the context of the critique of bourgeois art. The two problems that are pointed out are individualism and freedom. As a result 'The wave was never stronger than the men behind'. This seems to suggest that the failure with the neo-realism of the 1960s was the emphasis it gave to the personalities of the directors at the expense of the movement as a whole. This suggestion is further emphasized by the last rule of the Vow: 'The director must not be credited'. The idea is continued in the next paragraph which contains the pledge of the director to refrain from personal taste. This sounds like a return to the anonymity of the Middle Ages, when humility and the observance of the artistic canons took precedence over the artist's personality and personal glory.

From the outset of his artistic career von Trier was attracted by an aesthetic of the ugly, stating that his 'mission is to elevate the ugly', so we can safely assume that this last paragraph of the Manifesto was chiefly his own input.[18] In the final sentence he pledges to force the truth out of characters and settings 'at the cost of any good taste and any artistic considerations'. Such a gesture can be read, as Epstein puts it, as 'renew[ing] in all sharpness the sense of crisis that casts away aesthetic and moral values before the Supreme Value of something strange and unthinkable'.[19] Von Trier's intent, I suggest, is to destabilize the common visual perception of the viewer and together with this the whole set of axiological assumptions encoded in the cultivation of the beautiful forms.

These manifestos are not clearly elaborated pieces of theory. Their aim is primarily provocative rather than explanatory. As a result, the significance of terms such as 'illusion' and 'truth' are still debated. In general 'truth' is explained by pairing it with 'illusion'. Even if it is not mentioned explicitly in the manifesto, the chief target of its criticism is the mainstream cinema associated with Hollywood. The 'technological storm' refers almost certainly to those Hollywood productions that, from the late 1970s onwards, embraced simulation to various degrees thanks to the new possibilities offered by computer enhancement and editing. Observing the rules prescribed by the Vow, it assumes that one can depict a more profound reality than through

simulation. But it seems that this is just one form of truth, which does not exhaust all possibilities. As von Trier has written:

> To hang a mike up in a tree, to use a couple of toothpicks instead of a gigantic technical apparatus, this provides one form of cinematic truth. Or at least it gets more real. Truth is about searching an area in order to find something, but if you already beforehand know what you are looking for, then it's manipulation. Maybe truth is finding something you are not looking for . . .[20]

What von Trier is expressing is the way in which truth is not so much a conceptual issue but an event to be experienced, hopefully brought into being by the right circumstances. This is one reason why the idiot figure is so important in the Dogme 95 movement, for it is through the powerful experiences of the fool existing on the margins of society, outcast and humiliated, that we find an intimation of the reality beyond the visible. In search of 'truth', the fool provides a suitable vehicle for critiquing the flaws and illusions of modern culture, while offering a glimpse of a transcendental humanity. In order to evaluate how this was developed in the Dogme movement, we will now turn to those films inspired by the Manifesto.

THE CELEBRATION (1998)

The figure of the fool was present in the very first films produced under the manifesto by the Dogme brethren. Thomas Vinterberg's film, *The Celebration*, was the first of the Dogme films to be released. It is a commentary on the Dogma rules, but it lacks the avant-gardist manner of von Trier's *The Idiots*, released in the same year. The plot is relatively simple, respecting the classical unities of time, space and action, and it follows the classic dramaturgy developed along four phases: presentation, complication, confrontation and resolution.[21] However, the details of the story are unconventional. It focuses on a family reunion occasioned by a party organized for the family patriarch's sixtieth birthday. Apart from the guests all the members of the family are present to celebrate with Helge, the father: Elsie, his wife, Christian, the elder son, Michael, the younger son, and Helen, his daughter. We find out that a second daughter, Linda, committed suicide. The reunion is arranged to incorporate the minutest details, from social conventions such as the customary toasts to family traditions such as the march around the house and the breakfast next day. All of these rituals are designed to give the appearance of a normal contented bourgeois family. However, the norms of propriety are shockingly breached by Christian whose dinner speech alludes to the sexual abuse that he and his sister Linda suffered at the hands of his father. He ventures further into the rupture and proposes a toast to his father as Linda's murderer before accusing his mother of being aware of the abuse and turning a blind eye. Thrown out of the house by his outraged

family, Christian is finally vindicated when Helen reads a letter from Linda explaining the abuse and the truth can no longer be denied. Helge confesses his crime at the next day's breakfast and, having lost the support of the family, leaves the scene presumably to commit suicide.

In exposing his father, Christian plays the fool. At the dinner party for his father he stands and asks permission to make a toast. In a mid length shot the hand-held camera follows his movements as he takes out two notes and asks his father to choose between them. In an even voice he remembers how his father used to rape himself and his sister. The camera cuts to the guests' faces, lacking any expression, then to his mother who intervenes to change the subject. Family and guests connive to repress the inconvenient truth and redirect attention back to Helge's public persona. It is not only the authority of the patriarch of the family that is challenged and ultimately shown to lack any moral legitimacy. The rules of the bourgeois family are equally brought into question, as is indirectly the elitist hierarchy that Helge represents as an esteemed member of the Freemasons. This replicates the way in which Dogme 95 challenges the legitimacy of the old cinematic conventions: 'the bourgeois family parallels the bourgeois cinema'.[22] The film is more ambitious though since it attempts to unmask not only the wrongdoings of an individual but the collaboration of society in reinforcing the authority invested in social roles regardless of any individual merit. Truth struggles to emerge because everybody plays their own social roles mechanically without ever questioning the qualities of the human being behind the social mask. The reaction of the guests around the dinner table is revelatory: The terrible sexual abuse to which the father submitted Christian and Linda fails to make any impression on the guests who expect the toast to follow the customary address. The downfall of the patriarch and his world, however, announces the beginning of a new order. In the fight to usurp the authority of the patriarch class differences are leveled. The servants inhabiting the underground rooms and their masters become allies: Pia, the servant, follows Christian to Paris, for a continuation of their idyll.

It is worthwhile noting the name of the protagonist: Christian. No direct reference is made to religion, but Christian's attitude is receptive to apparitions from the otherworld. Whether or not the apparition of his dead sister is supposed to be for real or just a dream, Christian believes in its presence. The camera work, however, appears to confirm the objectivity of his perception at times by opposing the usual nervous, agitated shots with calm and static 'ghost views' from the perspective of the deceased Linda.[23] The connection established between Christian and the spirit of his dead sister renders him a Hamletian figure striving to reveal the truth about the death of his sister and expose the hypocrisy of the father. There are also other aspects that contribute to the 'metaphysical dimension' of the film: Linda's letter reads: 'I know that there is light and beauty on the other side'. Events happen which are inexplicable within the usual logic of cause-and-effect: Helen's shouting 'boo' at the receptionist after discovering the suicide letter initiates a sequence of cross cuttings which show Michael falling in the

shower, Christian losing his glass and Pia breaking out of water in the bathtub. This signals the importance of the discovery of the letter but is nevertheless beyond causality.[24] The camera work concurs with the diegesis to convey a sense of transcendence.

THE IDIOTS (1998)

Released shortly after *The Celebration*, Lars von Trier's *The Idiots* has been called the 'quintessential' Dogma film because of the correlation between form and content.[25] It is also the only Dogma film that can be considered avant-garde, with all others distributed on a continuum between art cinema and genre film, in spite of the rule no. 8 which bans genre films.[26] Furthermore, it stands alone as the only film with extensive commentary and documentation, such that in 1999 Jasper Jargil released the documentary *The Humiliated/De ydmygede*, shot at the same time with *The Idiots*, which made use of von Trier's diary during filming that was recorded on a Dictaphone. Its subject matter is, of course, of immediate interest, particularly given von Trier's increasing fascination with holy fools and the functions of the figure.

The Idiots is certainly the most competent meta-commentary on the 'Manifesto' and the most faithful to the 'Vow of Chastity', in spite of von Trier's confession that he made four violations of the rules. The film follows a hippy commune set up in a vacant house situated in the gentrified neighbourhood of Søllerød. The group is formed by disaffected middle class individuals who simulate mental disability by 'spassing' (adopting spastic behaviour). Stoffer, as the leader and ideologue of the group, describes their purpose as 'finding their inner idiot'. The film opens with members of the group in a restaurant, spassing and disturbing the other customers. Karen, who is sitting alone at a table, willingly follows them out as one of the group holds her hand and refuses to let it go. She realizes the deception but nevertheless decides to join them. Throughout the film Karen functions as the moral conscience of the group while eschewing participation in their activities. She is the only one who doesn't spass with two exceptions: she spontaneously breaks into a spass after the group is confronted with people that suffer from Down's syndrome, and secondly, at the end of the film when, after taking up Stoffer's challenge, she returns home to spass, which causes her husband to hit her. She is actually the only one that has the courage to spass in front of the people that have known her before joining the commune. We also find out that she had lost her child right before joining the group.

Birger Langkjaer identifies five levels of reality in the film: 'being'—the true characters; 'playing'—playing the idiot; 'reflexivity'—the interviews with members of the group, though it is never clear whether it is the real actors; 'becoming'—the film-making process revealed by seeing the film

crew, the camera and the microphones; and 'incoherence'—caused by people being and/or acting themselves like the people with disabilities, or by the impossibility of separating the character from the actor.[27] As a result the boundaries between acting and real life are blurred. At the same time, *The Idiots* is a film about playing by the rules, a commentary on the 'Vow of Chastity' and ultimately about its own making.[28] It is not difficult to draw a parallel between the protest of the brethren and the idiot group's anti-bourgeois attitude, or to compare Stoffer, the ideologue of the group, with von Trier himself. Furthermore, from the formal point of view, the spassing in the story replicates the 'spassing' on the technical level: the shots are out of focus, the image often wobbles, the editing is abrupt, to enumerate only a few of the apparent incompetences on Berys Gaunt's inventory.[29] The correspondences can be taken further: The back-to-basics cinema is matched by the return to a state of innocence symbolized by the idiot figure.[30] However, as von Trier says, practicing the 'idiot technique' doesn't guarantee that something will come out of it, either in cinema or in life.[31] In spite of her initial misgivings, Karen turns out to be the only one for whom spassing acquires an existential meaning.

The trope of idiocy is a versatile tool in von Trier's hand and he uses it on two simultaneous levels: both as a critique of this world and as part of a search for a higher truth. The commune can be seen as a secular version of the Feast of the Fools, the carnivalesque practice that occurred over much of Europe in the Middle Ages, including Denmark.[32] Stoffer, as the Lord of Misrule, licenses behaviours that are disrupting socially and excessive privately, involving the functions of the lower body—digestive and reproductive—very much in the carnivalesque tradition. His aim is twofold: to expose the hypocrisy and the self-sufficiency of the Danish middle-class bourgeoisie and to critique identity politics as promoted by the state by 'playing out the commodification of identity-as-difference as a form of political transgression'.[33] This is obvious in the reaction of the middle-class couple that come to see a house for sale and are told that the 'retarded' folks next door use its garden for recreational purposes: Although they don't admit it, it is clear that the couple are deeply unhappy at the prospect of living next door to those with disabilities and their political 'empowerment' is, therefore, of little consequence. In contrast, the working-class people offer rather more sympathy for the disabled played by Stoffer's group on a visit to their factory.

The flaw with Stoffer's commune, however, is that it is just another social experiment, weighed down by ideology, which, like the French Wave that the 'Manifesto' criticises, started full of good intention but failed to achieve its aims due to the means used. Stoffer himself has no sympathy for the cause of the truly mentally disabled; he merely confiscates it in order to use its political power to denounce the 'conservative sameness that maintains the orderly surface of our culture and firmly positions and imprisons the subject within it'.[34] This is obvious when a councilman comes to bribe Stoffer

into taking his group out of Søllerød, the poshest district of Copenhagen. The leader of the group loses control and runs naked after the councilman screaming and calling him a 'Søllerød fascist'. However, just a few sequences earlier Stoffer's own remarks echo the fascist eugenics programme. When his group invites a group of Down's syndrome guests for a luncheon lawn party, confronted with real disabilities Stoffer becomes irritated that other members of the group are enjoying their company. He chastises his fellow comrades for being too sentimental and, in a sarcastic tone, suggests callously: 'Hey, let's measure their skulls and gas them'. His faking of idiocy is revealed to be lacking in authenticity and serves merely to vent his resentment. He legitimates his behaviour through a powerful cultural critique but it is not supported by an authentic existence. While Stoffer's behaviour preserves its subversiveness through his refusal to participate in the exchanges of the consumerist society, it is rendered existentially inefficient since it is ultimately devised as a means of self-gratification. As Cecilia Sjöholm puts it, there is no 'moment of sacrifice in which pleasure is given up: there is no decapitation of the revolt'.[35]

It is important to note that von Trier proposes the idiot figure as a counterweight to rationality. He conceives of rationality as having its origins in anxiety. What he means is that anxiety is the product of chaos and in order to counter chaos humankind uses rationality as a defence mechanism. Human rationality therefore eliminates any conflicts and contradictions from the world and, what is more important, this blocks the expression of irrationality.[36] It is by means of rationality that chaos can be controlled and von Trier had developed a reputation, prior to Dogme 95, as a control freak. His technical virtuosities were an expression of a precise and ordered mindset. With Dogme 95 Von Trier challenged himself into ceding such perfectionist control, thereby offering a provocation to his fellow directors. He hoped that through the process of relinquishing control some kind of 'truth' would emerge that is not fabricated. This idea is very similar to the spiritual logic that underlies the conception of holy foolishness: by giving up your rational mind you make room for a kind of illuminated irrationality to irrupt.

Idiocy, for von Trier, is also a way to recuperate a state of purity. Nudity as a way to play the idiot means 'giving up vanity', or returning to a state of nature.[37] Von Trier also refers to nakedness as the state of humanity at creation, adding one further significance to his idiot: 'if you want to try to get back to that starting point, you have to use nudity to get there'.[38] As Stoffer puts it 'In the Stone Age, all the idiots died', meaning that it was the beginning of civilization that bought the loss of innocence. Stoffer hints at a celebration of the 'romantic conception that children, idiots, and, especially sensitive women have particular easy access to human primordial feeling', as Schepelern puts it.[39] Strikingly, he says that the idiot is 'the man of the future'. The remark can be taken ironically but it also discloses an

Figure 7.1 Karen spassing at home. (*The Idiots*)

eschatological dimension: if a future kingdom of true justice is to appear, it will belong to the 'pure in heart'.

Unfortunately, Stoffer's desire for purity is merely rhetorical, and indeed the genuine holy fool lies elsewhere. Only Karen has the purity of heart to meet von Trier's ideal, becoming in the process a holy idiot. Karen is twice an outsider, a counterculture within the counterculture. On the one hand she breached social conventions when she failed to attend the funeral of her child, and on the other she does not participate fully in the commune's activities, questioning the rules of the commune both verbally and through her behaviour. From this point of view, she functions as the moral compass of the film. Paradoxically, she refuses to play a role but she is the only one that ultimately finds an existential meaning in the game and the only one that 'spasses' when it involves accountability. Her last words addressed to the group: 'I love you all more than I have ever loved anybody . . . Maybe with one exception' and the final spassing bring out the two principles that constitute von Trier's holy fools and his idea of religion: goodness and passion. The fact that Karen misses her baby's funeral is not without significance. She can find more meaning and possibilities of coming to terms with her grief in the commune than in the formality of the church rituals. The former offers her an experience that transcends the immediate reality. Let us look at Karen's confrontation with her family. After receiving a cold reception from them, including from her husband who coldly suggests that her absence from the funeral was because she was not too upset, she sits on the sofa. All

the members of the family are gathered for afternoon tea. The hand-held camera pans dizzyingly from one figure to another and cuts to close-ups to capture expressions. Nobody offers words, merely helping themselves to the cake. The camera zooms in as Karen starts to let the cake dribble out of her mouth, pans to the stunned expressions of the family and returns to Karen who continues to spass until her husband hits her violently. Keeping silent she leaves her home. As Hanna Laakso observes 'truth lies in silence' not in words.[40] In this respect Karen resembles Palladius's holy fool incapable of communicating anything besides performing her self-abasement. For Karen spassing is as much liberation from conventions as it is a form of recuperating authenticity. At the same time, it is a way to expose the formalism of personal relations and to critique the state-promoted identity politics.

MIFUNE (1999)

The third film in the Dogme series by director Søren Kragh-Jacobsen is a comedy in the form of a fable about the humanity to be found in idiocy and its power to instill authenticity in life. Kersten is newly married to his boss's daughter and has a successful career in Copenhagen. News arrives about the death of his father and he has to return to the farm on which he was raised in order to attend the funeral. Before he can return he needs to make arrangements for his mentally disabled brother Rud. He hires Liva, a former prostitute as a housekeeper and falls in love with her; as a result of which, in spite of losing his wife and his job, he finds real happiness. The role of Rud is to lay bare the role-playing of the other characters since he is the only one that is authentically himself, never adopting any masks.[41] Kersten is playing the city boy, concealing his humble origins by pretending he is an orphan. At the same time, in private, he impersonates Toshiro Mifune, the Japanese actor famous for playing a bogus samurai of peasant origin. This fantasy world that Kersten creates for himself helps to pacify Rud. Liva plays alternatively the prostitute and the housekeeper. Only when they abandon their social roles, the director suggests, do they regain a childlike state and discover their real identity.[42]

What Rud has to offer is the lost simplicity of life, which is seen as more authentic than the hypocrisy of social relations in Copenhagen. At the same time official religion is contrasted with Rud's childish faith. At the funeral he appears to be the only one genuinely distressed about the father's death. In his simple-mindedness he believes in the immortality of his father's soul, while at the same time his supernatural world is populated with aliens and cartoon characters. He is the embodiment of goodness and naivety and his faith in a world beyond that experienced by senses is vibrant, syncretic though it is. This does not prevent the pastor from reproaching Kersten about his brother's ignorance of official religion, saying that 'even the idiots can be religious'. Rud's belief in

the existence of aliens will nonetheless be vindicated in one of the last sequence of the film. We first see Kersten in mid length shots looking for Rud through the woods and fields, guided by his clothes left hanging on the way. Then a birds-eye view discloses circular patterns in the field, presumably left by a UFO. Through Rud the possibility opens of another life and a different perspective on it. This is reinforced by the final sequence in which Rud is shown holding the recording camera, a half-ironic nod to the 'idiot technique' and the 'idiot' director.

THE KING IS ALIVE (2000)

The idea of the fool continued to be explored in the fourth of the Dogme films, directed by Kristian Levring, but this time using a much more classic reference to madness. In *The King Is Alive* Levring places in the foreground a very interesting play-within-film situation. A coach finds itself adrift from the correct route and, as a consequence, a group of American, British and French tourists find themselves stranded in the dunes of the Namibian desert. Fortunately, they stumble across a deserted diamond mine where they encounter a solitary native, Kanana, who has been living there for years. Even more luckily, the place has some food to offer in the form of ancient tins of carrots. The most experienced of the tourists, an army man, then decides to leave in search of help. While they are waiting for him, a former actor, Henry, invites them to take part in the play he is rewriting from memory: *King Lear*. He first proposes the role of Cordelia to Catherine, a young French woman. She is interested both in the part and in Henry, but considers the others a poor intellectual match so she refuses. Instead the naïve young Gina accepts, attracting envy for the rest of the film. She also attracts the sexual interest and the hate of Charles, a middle-age man. Catherine and Charles cause Gina's premature death, while at the same time all coupled relationships in the film become disheveled. The finale brings a moment of reconciliation and transcendence prompted by the deaths of the military man and Gina.

As with *The Idiots*, *The King is Alive* is a commentary on the usefulness of rules. First, there are the rules of survival that those stranded in the desert need to learn. They can only ensure the survival of the body through the simple preservation of biological life. But soon they realize the fragility of their own situation: Jack, the desert savant who has taught them rules of survival, becomes the first victim of the desert. If the rules of nature cannot offer a real escape, then the rules of culture offer an alternative option. With an initial degree of reticence they decide to take part in the play. For the Namibian hermit, unable to understand the foreigners' language, the performance of *King Lear* seems to be a kind of madness that has affected their minds: a manifestation of their fear of the desert. He sees the play as yet another survival strategy devised to banish the thought of their hopeless

situation and postpone their confrontation with the desert and the possibility of death. He is correct in his observation that they initially 'speak without speaking to each other', but in time the process of rehearsing becomes much more than a futile exercise.

The play offers the possibility of assuming different identities, but it also licenses foolish behaviour that would be unacceptable in a normal social context. The desert itself functions as a place where all the relationships preserved by social conventions collapse, either in order to be renewed, as in the case of Liz and her husband, Ray, or to be lost irremediably, as in the case of Amanda and her husband Paul. The characters are confronted not only by the desert but also by their own repressed selves.[43] In a sense, the desert represents a return to an original situation from which life needs to be restructured upon different foundations. As with *The Idiots*, life itself encroaches on fiction, changing its course, and the play also alters life when the parts are existentially assumed. Gina, who is playing Cordelia, is poisoned in reality by Catherine, envious that she is not playing the role, thereby reenacting the literary conflict between Lear's daughters. Henry, who temporarily assumes the role of Lear when the original actor suffers a stroke, has himself an unresolved issue with his own daughter and while impersonating Lear he is also bonding with Gina.

Of all the characters, it is Gina who offers the most spectacular surprise. She begins the film as a stereotype for a shallow bourgeois American girl and evolves into a Christ-like figure. Her naivety, verging on simple-mindedness, is contrasted from the outset with Catherine's intellectual sophistication. Taking advantage of Gina's complete ignorance of the French language, Catherine mocks her friendly and trustful manner. Again, mind and heart are played against each other to the former's disadvantage. The second force that leads to her destruction is vanity, embodied by the middle-class pedant Charles. Gina's behaviour in relation to him is intriguing, but its significance is only disclosed at the end. She submits herself to his sexual fantasies not only to make the play possible but also in order to reveal his vanity and self-centredness. Old enough to act as a paternal figure for Gina, he takes his sexual instincts to be an expression of love, only to reveal himself as a polar opposite to Henry. Once exposed for what he is, Charles's sense of vanity cannot suffer any reminders of his own humiliation and so he applies to Gina the coup de grace, drowning and desecrating the mouth that has uttered the truth. Thus Gina, like Karen in *The Idiots*, assumes her role as Cordelia existentially and pays the ultimate price, which projects her as both a Christ-like and a holy fool figure. Her Christ-like quality results not only from her being an innocent victim but is also alluded in Charles's remorseful gesture to take his own life by hanging himself in a manner similar to Judas Iscariot. Gina's transformation into a holy fool takes place when the word turns into self-sacrifice. Here Kristian Levring reiterates von Trier's privileging of the act over the word.

There is a transcendental element at play in the film. Death, and particularly the death of the innocent, seems to be the only possible awakening experience, capable of creating a breach in the immanence of everyday routines that stifle any metaphysical concern. The first instance when they act in solidarity is when they face the perils of the desert in order to find the desert savant's corpse and give him a Christian burial. The second is occasioned by Gina's death, which, I suggest, is more than a form of catharsis. Gathered round the fire for a spontaneous mourning ceremony, they experience a moment of transcendence. In his expressions Henry not only plays Lear empathically but is Lear voicing his despair at the loss of Cordelia. While in the first sequences the group were preoccupied by the unfinished business left behind, they are now transported into a state of awe which opens the possibility of something sublime, beyond the immediate reality. If *King Lear* is about losing and regaining a kingdom, *The King Is Alive* can be read as being about losing one kingdom in order to intuit the possibility of another. Their new experience suspends that feeling of fear that has constantly accompanied them, and their physical salvation, which is realised at the end, becomes less important when compared to the quasi-religious 'truth' they have experienced.

In Levring's film the form matches the content in a similar manner to *The Idiots*: complying with the 'Vow of Chastity' to a large extent, on a formal level it is 'a form of cinematic purity, a return to cinema's origin';[44] this is replicated diegetically by a return to an original form of humanity in which the characters are stripped of their social masks and recover a lost sense of solidarity and even innocence. As Martha P. Nochimson notices, it is not the content of the narrative in *King Lear* that operates the change but the 'play's ability to confer on the almost hopeless group a continuous, collaborative, spontaneous, humanizing act of narrative, the foundation of human community'.[45] Arguably, this act of humanization and purification is perfected through self-sacrificing and suffering, which is the lesson that Gina, in spite of her simple-mindedness, can teach the others. In her expression of a foolishness that is transcendental and holy, she offers the possibility of a new and more hopeful reality.

TRULY HUMAN (2001) AND *IN YOUR HANDS* (2004)

Two further Danish films are worth examining from the later waves of the Dogme movement, which demonstrate the continuing influence of the fool figure. Åke Sandgren's film *Truly Human* is a fantasy designed to challenge our uncritical assumptions and takes for granted an understanding of our social rules and conventions. The story is probably the most unrealistic of all Dogme films, and it is unlikely that the original Dogme 95 strictures would have permitted instances such as that where the teenage P is materialized out of the wall where he has lived for years. However, the

film manages to present a compelling parable. When 6-year-old girl Lisa dies in a car accident her (imaginary) older brother P, who is living behind the wallpaper in her room, enters into real life. He is actually the aborted son of Lisa's parents, but they don't recognize him and he is delivered to a refugee center. He is totally inarticulate and ignorant of all things human, and as a result of a misunderstanding he is thought to be called Ahmed. Soon he begins to talk and eventually is considered fit enough to live by himself in society. Outside he is met with suspicion and abuse, while his bonding with children is mistaken for pedophilia. This makes him decide to withdraw to where he came from and time returns to the moment before Lisa's death.

Sandgren's intention was to imagine how the world would receive an unspoilt person.[46] The film builds on the idea that an otherworldly presence in this world cannot but appear idiotic. In other words, the figure of the idiot is eminently suited to embody the absolute idea of goodness and innocence, and we can easily recognize here the same impulse that lies behind Dostoevsky's Prince Myshkin. That P stands for much more than merely Lisa's brother may be inferred from her relationship with him, which takes the form of worship with ritual candle-lighting; from the mysterious presence of a boy choir that appears and disappears around him, as if a host of angels; and from his repeating that he wants to become 'truly human', in a language reminiscent of the incarnation dogma. Strikingly, P is completely ignorant that social decorum bans nakedness in public; this appears in the film as a mark of innocence and equality, a stripping off of the social status embedded in clothes. The film is again a meta-commentary on the Dogme and its stripping of contemporary cinematic conventions. If, on one level, idiocy designates that which remains incomprehensible, possibly the divine, on another social level the idiot becomes an emblem for difference and the difficulties we have in fully comprehending it.

By contrast, Annette K. Olesen's 2004 Dogme film *In Your Hands*, is probably the most overtly religious film that has emerged from the movement, and looks back to the Danish films explored in the previous chapter. The protagonist is a female priest Anna whose first assignment is in a women's prison. She is a liberal vicar, well-intentioned and initially full of enthusiasm for her mission. She has a rationalist approach to miracles and when questioned by an inmate whether she believes in the miracles performed by Jesus, not unlike the minister in Dreyer's *The Word*, she replies that they should be taken in a metaphorical way, meaning that miracles are theoretically possible. A new inmate arrives at the prison, Kate, who soon acquires a reputation as a miracle worker with the drug addicts. Her visionary gifts are revealed when she guesses that Anna is pregnant, in spite of her alleged incapacity to conceive. Intrigued, Anna discovers that Kate is guilty of having left her daughter to die of thirst when she was on drugs. When Anna finds out that there are chances to give birth to a disabled child, she desperately turns to Kate for help but loses faith in her powers and throws

Kate's crime into her face. The other inmates overhear the conversation and start to persecute Kate, who intentionally takes an overdose and dies. Anna decides not to take any risks and has an abortion.

Anna and Kate represent two different channels for the works of God: the ordained minister, legitimated by the Church's appointment, and the charismatic miracle worker who has no official legitimacy and not even personal sanctity. Anna has just finished her seminary training and knows how to preach about responsibility. Kate is completely ignorant in religious matters: She doesn't even know the Lord's Prayer, but she is rumored to have had a vision, a personal encounter with God. She is an illuminated idiot. The representative of established religion feels challenged by this free manifestation of grace which escapes the rational. She cannot explain reasonably either the real occurrence of miracles or the possibility of grace working through a sinful person. Kate stands here for the possibility of experiencing transcendence outside the established order, and her endorsement of truth is not dogmatic. Standing outside the boundaries of common morality and rationality, she represents the critical function that foolishness holds in exposing truth to power.

On a different level the film is also about the Dogme 95 rules, and how the old institutions of film-making were incapable of containing genuine meaning and emotions. It also brings to light the reason why the idiot is

Figure 7.2 Anna teaching Kate how to pray. (*In Your Hands*)

such a potent figure in Dogma 95. One could say that it embodies its spirit in an exemplary way. The idiot figure and Dogme 95 correspond in at least two key respects: marginality (Dogma 95 defies itself as outside and against mainstream Hollywood cinema) and simplicity (through a return to the basics of film-making). The awkwardness of the film-making techniques used appears idiotic in comparison with mainstream cinema. In this respect the idiot figure can function as a stylistic emblem for the whole movement and their 'counter-hegemonic aspirations'.[47] At the same time, the holy fool figure makes its appearance in the narratives as well, with important critical functions.

THE CRITICAL POWER OF THE IDIOT IN THE DOGME FILMS

In all the films discussed the trope of idiocy or foolishness functions by drawing on attributes traditionally ascribed to idiots and fools through various religious traditions. Assuming or being ascribed the position of the fool involves a collapse in status which renders unstable all other social relationships.[48] This lays the ground for an egalitarian society in which individuals are stripped of their social roles and can achieve a greater degree of authenticity or a more unified identity. In *The Idiots* the commune functions as a temporary, willed, suspension of socially ascribed roles. In the other films, the idiot figure invites a renunciation of social hierarchies. This facilitates the formation of new relationships by rediscovering the lost sense of humanity and community. In this connection Brian Gibson writes about 'transcendental humanism': 'an effect or aim, revealing a holiness or secular spiritualism rooted in human community—friendship, a sexual relationship, or merely an attempt at social interaction or integration—that not only transcends the everyday, material world'.[49]

Is the idiot in these Dogme films the representative of this 'transcendental humanism' or something more divine? The 'Manifesto' does not state explicitly any such intention, but it does mention the term 'bourgeois' three times: a term that has often caused critics to suggest that this is a juvenile relic from von Trier's socialist upbringing. Jack Stevenson, however, draws attention to the fact that in *The Idiots* the target of von Trier's criticism is not the bourgeoisie per se, as the manifesto suggests, but what he calls 'The Group', in Danish 'velfaerdsdanskere', which indicates membership of the Danish welfare state.[50] Thus, the group designates everybody, regardless of wealth or social status; it is 'an anonymous, monolithic and disembodied presence—just a state of mind'.[51] What is then the significance of 'bourgeois' for von Trier and these directors? Given the religious undertones of the manifesto and its Danish context, I will turn to Kierkegaard for whom the 'bourgeois' designates not only a social category, but a spiritual one. The bourgeois spirit is one impervious to the divine because it is completely

grounded in the trivial practicalities of this world: 'the philistine-bourgeois mentality lacks every qualification of spirit and is completely wrapped up in probability, within which possibility finds its small corner; therefore it lacks the possibility of becoming aware of God'.[52] In this sense, 'The Group' can be considered generalized 'bourgeoisie' but in a religious context rather different from Kierkegaard's age.

A recent sociological investigation confirms this picture of the Danish society. As far as religion is concerned we encounter a paradox: more than 80 percent of the population and 90 percent of the ethnic Danes are registered with the Danish Lutheran Church, which is a state church; yet regular church attendance is about 5 percent. The sociological investigation reaches even more intriguing conclusions: In spite of identifying themselves as Christians, the majority of the Danes do not have a strong belief in the existence of God, let alone the teachings of the Church. The situation is termed by Phil Zuckerman as a 'cultural religion': designating an apathy which involves occasional engagement in 'ostensibly religious practices, without truly believing in the supernatural content thereof'.[53] At the same time, there is a reticence on the part of those who admit they do not believe in the existence of God to recognize that they are atheists. Some would still admit they believe in 'something' without being able to define precisely what that is.[54]

With this picture in mind, the indictment of the 'bourgeois' would sound less dated if understood as directed towards a world searching blindly for new meaning. In this sense idiocy represents a challenge to the rationality of this world, threatening to throw it into chaos. The effect is destabilizing and a breach is created through which the possibility of transcendence appears. The critical power of the fool, therefore, not only exposes the conventions and fragile order that bind contemporary society, but is also capable of pointing to a transcendental or holy realization of truth. The attempt to overcome conventional 'reality' has been emphasised in my study of the Dogme films. In *The Celebration* there are several instances when the camera suggests the real presence of the protagonist's dead sister; in *The Idiots* the commune is in search of their inner idiot, envisioned as a return to a primordial purity; in *Mifune* there is a clear suggestion that Rud, the idiot figure, might not be entirely misled in his belief in aliens, while in *Truly Human* an entity who could be anything from divine to imaginary takes centre stage. What is on offer here is more than a study of psychological states, as Berys Gaunt argues.[55] The intimations of another reality in the films mentioned indicate that the supernatural is in fact an important constitutive of this 'realist' project.

What the Dogme 95 movement has achieved is to launch the holy fool into a twenty-first century context, in a way that loosens its ties to religious culture, whether in Denmark or elsewhere. I do not share John Orr's opinion that 'Dogme's moron-siblings are thus variants of [Dreyer's] holy fool in *Ordet*, but with little trace of the sacred in sight'.[56] As this exploration

has shown, the Dogma 95 films are a more ambitious undertaking, especially when set against the context of an apathetic 'cultural Christianity'. The forty years that separate *Ordet* from Dogma 95 have seen the end of modernism, the development of and, according to some accounts, possibly the demise of postmodernism. In this secularized world, operating outside the traditional ways of theologizing, this has resulted in a dramatic change in views on religion and the theories of truth it upholds. The holy fool has returned, burdened with history, to criticize the ways of the world and bring vestiges of transcendence. This transcendence is, however, no longer predicated from the now inconvenient position of the religious master-narrative, a setting condemned by postmodern criticism. The 'truth', or at least a more meaningful set of values, is located in the humble and marginal figure of the idiot. Humbleness and suffering go hand in hand. For von Trier it is the sacrifice that ensures the meaningfulness of an existence.[57] The 'truth' he is concerned with is precisely to be found in this instance in which the character, at the highest state of his/her passion, is willing to make a sacrifice; in other words when the 'idiot technique' is internalised.[58] The idiot then bears the marks of suffering. This is true not only of Karen but also of other characters in Dogma 95 films: Gina in *The King Is Alive*, P in *Truly Human*, Kate in *In Your Hands*.

What the Dogme films promise is a new mode of holy foolishness in cinema. It is clear from the above analysis von Trier's 'stunt' has generated a model occasioned by the performance of the holy fool, but pointing to a new kind of common aesthetics, using the fool or idiot as a means of critiquing society and conventions. The significance of this interpretation for the future of the holy fool in cinema is twofold. On the one hand, it allows us to reconcile two apparently contradictory dimensions which frequently appear in discussion: the irony and the seriousness of the whole Dogme 95 project. While holy foolishness preserves playful elements, seriousness is rescued by reinterpreting the game on a higher level. On the other hand, not only does the holy fool offer a model figure for critiquing dysfunctional societies in many disparate contexts, but also the figure points towards the possibility of transcendence in a world where traditional religious narratives are receding.

NOTES

1. Michel de Certeau, *La fable mystique XVIe-XVIIe siècle* (Paris: Gallimard, 1982), 37.
2. Mette Hjort and Scott MacKenzie, *Purity and Provocation: Dogma 95* (London: British Film Institute, 2003), 10.
3. Ibid., 10.
4. "The Dogmesecretariat Is Closing: June 2002", in Carolyn Jess, "New-ness, Sequelization, and Dogme Logic in Kristian Levring's *The King Is Alive*", New *Cinemas: Journal of Contemporary Film* 3 (2005): 3–16.

5. Lars von Trier, "The Man Who Would Give Up Control", Interview by Peter Øvig Knudsen, 1998, in *Lars von Trier: Interviews*, ed. Jan Lumholdt (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2003), 124.
6. Caroline Bainbridge, *The Cinema of Lars von Trier: Authenticity and Artifice* (London: Wallflower Press, 2007), 85.
7. For the full versions of the 'Manifesto' see Lars von Trier and Thomas Vinterberg, "The Dogma 95 Manifesto and Vow of Chastity", *p.o.v.*: *A Danish Journal of Film Studies* 10 (2000), accessed February 8, 2009, http://imv.aau.dk/publikationer/pov/POV.html
8. Lars von Trier and Thomas Vinterberg, "The Dogma 95 Manifesto and Vow of Chastity," *p.o.v.*: *A Danish Journal of Film Studies* 10 (2000), accessed February 8, 2009, http://imv.aau.dk/publikationer/pov/POV.html
9. Patricia Thompson, "*The Idiots* Plays By Von Trier's Rules," *American Cinematographer* 81 (2000): 20.
10. von Trier, "The Man," 122.
11. Lars von Trier, "Passion Is the Lifeblood of Cinema," Interview by Ole Michelsen (1982) in *Lars von Trier: Interviews*, ed. Jan Lumholdt (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2003), 12.
12. Lars von Trier, "We Are All Sinners," Interview by Peter Rundle (1999), accessed April 25, 2008, www.geocities.com/lars_von_trier2000/interview1/html
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14. Jan Simons, "Playing the Waves: The Name of the Game Is Dogme 95" in *Cinephilia: Movies, Love and Memory*, ed. Marijke de Valck and Malte Hagener (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2005), 181.
15. von Trier, "Passion," 5.
16. Mikhail Epstein, *After the Future: The Paradoxes of Postmodernism and Contemporary Russian Culture* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1995), 53.
17. Ibid., 53.
18. von Trier, "Passion," 10.
19. Epstein, *After the Future*, 45.
20. von Trier, "The Man", 122.
21. Claus Christensen, "The Celebration of Rules", *p.o.v.*: *A Danish Journal of Film* Studies 10 (2000), accessed February 8, 2009, http://imv.aau.dk/publikationer/pov/POV.html
22. Berys Gaunt, "Naked Film: Dogma and Its Limits" in *Purity and Provocation*: Dogma 95, ed. Mette Hjort and Scott MacKenzie (London : British Film Institute, 2003), 96.
23. Thomas Lind Laursen, "The Agitated Camera: A Diagnosis of Anthony Dod Mantle's Camera Work in *The Celebration*", *p.o.v.*: *A Danish Journal of Film Studies*, 10 (2000), accessed February 8, 2009, http://imv.aau.dk/publikationer/pov/POV.html
24. Palle Schantz Lauridsen, "*The Celebration*: Classical Drama and Docu Soap Style", *p.o.v.*: *A Danish Journal of Film Studies*, 10 (2000), accessed February 8, 2009, http://imv.aau.dk/publikationer/pov/POV.html
25. Peter Schepelern, "Film according to Dogma: Ground Rules, Obstacles, and Liberations" in *Transnational Cinema in Global North: Nordic Cinema in Transition*, ed. Andrew Nestingen and Trevor G. Elkington (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2005), 88.
26. Birger Langkjaer, "What Was Dogme 95?," *Film International* 19 (2006): 40.
27. Ibid., 41.
28. Schepelern, "Film According to Dogma," 64, Gaunt, "Naked film," 93.
29. Gaunt, "Naked Film," 94.

30. According to Thomsen, von Trier found his inspiration from an idea of Rudolf Steiner that people with Down's syndrome are like angels sent as a present to mankind, cf. Bodil Marie Thomsen, "Idiocy, Foolishness, and Spastic Jesting," *p.o.v.* 10 (2000).
31. von Trier, "The Man," 123.
32. Clement A. Miles, *Christmas Customs and Traditions, Their History and Significance* (New York: Dover Publications, 1976), 308.
33. John Roberts, "Dogme 95,"*New Left Review*, I (1999): 145.
34. Tim Walters, "Reconsidering *The Idiots*: Dogme 95, Lars von Trier, and the Cinema of Subversion?" *The Velvet Light Trap* 53 (2004): 46.
35. Cecilia Sjöholm, *Kristeva and the political* (London: Routledge, 2005), 106.
36. Stig Björkman, *Trier on von Trier* (London: Faber and Faber, 2005), 205.
37. Ibid., 216.
38. Ibid., 207.
39. Schepelern, "Film According to Dogma," 89.
40. Haana Laakso, "Idioterne/The Idiots" in *The Cinema of Scandinavia*, ed. Tytti Soila (London: Wallflower, 2005), 209.
41. Simons, "Playing the Waves," 57.
42. Ian Conrich and Estella Tincknell, "Film Purity, the Neo-Bazinian Ideal, and Humanism in Dogma '95," *p.o.v.* 10 (2000)
43. Jess, "New-ness," 8.
44. Ibid., 9.
45. Martha P. Nochimson, "The King Is Alive," *Film Quarterly* 55 (2001–2002): 52.
46. Claus Christensen, "A Satirical Glance at Modern-day Life," *Film # 15* (Danish Film Institute, 2001): 7.
47. Walters, "Reconsidering," 40.
48. Orrin E. Klapp, "The Fool as a Social Type" in *The Pleasures of Sociology*, ed. Lewis A. Coser (New York: New American Library, 1980), 252.
49. Brian Gibson, "Ringing the Bells in Celebration: Red, *Breaking the Waves* and Transcendent Humanism in Dogme Films," *Scope* 2 (2005)
50. Jack Stevenson, *Lars von Trier* (London: British Film Institute, 2002), 128.
51. Ibid., 129.
52. Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death: A Christian Psychological Exposition for Upbuilding and Awakening*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 41.
53. Phil Zuckerman, *Society Without God: What the Least Religious Nations Can Tell Us About Contentment* (New York: New York University Press, 2008), 155.
54. Ibid., 163.
55. Gaunt, "Naked Film," 98.
56. John Orr, "Out of Dreyer's Shadow? The quandary of Dogme 95," *New Cinema* 1 (2002): 72.
57. Björkman, *Trier*, 221.
58. von Trier, "The Man," 124.

Conclusion

This book is grounded in an understanding of European holy foolishness as rooted in its various Christian cultures. In the light of this understanding I began by sketching a cultural history of the phenomenon through a selection of its most pertinent theoretical accounts and figures: either real practitioners, as framed by the hagiographic writings from Antiquity to Middle Ages, or fictional polemic characters as conceived in philosophical and literary texts. I took as the starting point Paul's *First Epistle to the Corinthians* in which the weak, the foolish and the low of this world are exalted over their opposites. In line with this investigation I proposed a reading of the text as a cultural critique. The expression 'foolishness (*moria*) of God' is used here rhetorically as a way to stand the epistemological assumptions of the apostle's audience on their head, as well as their worldly wisdom. The 'fool for Christ' as a follower of this paradoxical wisdom of the cross, is neither one initiated in a kind of Christian gnosis, nor one given to practising moderation, but is rather the one who willingly suffers tribulations for his/her truth. Therefore, two relevant characteristics of holy foolishness derive from this foundational text, that each enriches its initial definition as a deviation from normative reason invested with religious meaning. First, it is a relative concept, in the sense that it becomes apparent in relation to customary practices as either a deviation or a correction, and second it implies practical consequences, rendering the one who embraces it susceptible to suffering through the body, in imitation of the divine model. The more intense and excessive their dedication to the idea that animates them is, the greater their friction with the outside world.

St Paul's understanding of divine folly in theatrical terms, with the apostles becoming a spectacle for the world, was developed into a dramatic form by later Christian cultures, particularly those indebted to the Byzantine tradition. The use of the holy fool to critique the existing political and social order became an ingrained cultural practice with variants from the *yurodivy* in Russia to the cult of St Francis of Assisi in Catholic Europe. These forms emerged onto the canvas of a world settled in its Christian convictions and hierarchical structures–a world in which the canons of representation still retained their power. The modern age, however, brought

with it a 'prodigious event' that shattered this order: secularism and the 'death of God' recorded by Nietzsche and proclaimed by his fool. Taken not in an ontological sense, but in a social-psychological one, the proclamation indicated that the existence of God had lost its significance for Christian society and the individual self. In this context of a secularizing world, three emblematic figures emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century to comment on this troubled background, whose profile would percolate into the cinematic world, breaking the traditional canon and enriching the holy fool morphologies.

Dostoevsky's idiot, Prince Myshkin, was employed to launch an attack against the excessive rationality promoted by the medical sciences of his day. At the same time his holy fool bears the marks of his time: Although his simple presence exposes the moral corruption of his circle, his goodness is ultimately devoid of redemptive power. If Dostoevsky described the symptoms, Nietzsche spelled out the diagnosis. His fool comes to interrogate people about God: a God who is soon announced to be dead because Christianity itself has ceased to believe in His existence. For Søren Kierkegaard the situation was similar, facing a Christendom that no longer understood the meaning of a living God. His foolish knight of faith, 'great by that hope whose form is madness', is pitted against this spiritual wasteland, in an attempt to reintegrate faith into the realm of divine madness. These three figures of Dostoevsky, Nietzsche and Kierkegaard have offered different models for the critical function of the modern holy fool. These are: the benevolent fool whose holiness is understood as goodness in contrast to the world; the maximalist fool, in which faith and sacrifice come together in defiance of the social order; and the minimalist fool, who still keeps alive the memory of God forgotten by all others. These models, as interpreted by various national cultures, ensured that the figure would retain its artistic utility in the twentieth century as a means of critiquing the failings of the contemporary order.

The secularisation of European societies provided a watershed moment in culture with ramifications for performative art, including the cinematic holy fool. In my exploration of three distinct European cinematic traditions in Russia, France and Denmark, encompassing respectively elements of Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant Christianity, it has been possible to observe the continuities and discontinuities between the hagiography-based holy fools, supposedly real but determined by their own literary conventions, and the cinematic holy fools. This has allowed a thorough examination of the critical functions of the cinematic holy fool. The first object of exploration was representative films from Soviet and post-Soviet Russian cinema. Russian culture and by extrapolation Russian cinema present us with a unique situation. Nowhere else in the cinemas of nominally Christian Orthodox countries has the holy fool figure developed such a pervasive presence as a tool of cultural interpretation. This is due to the fact that the holy fool, as a knot of contradictions, was seen as the perfect expression of

the tensions embedded in the religio-nationalistic identity narrative known as the 'Russian Idea', primarily the tension between institutionalized power and the ideal of a Christ-bearing commune. This tension, translated through the historical opposition between the holy fool and the tsar, empowered the figure for future social and political criticism. The widespread use of the figure does, however, present a disadvantage in that its overuse and familiarity can blunt its critical power. This is the case with the first category of fools which I have designated as 'hagiography-inspired'; in other words, those that use historical figures for their inspiration. Eisenstein, Bondarchuk and Klimov offered episodic characters in this form, each of whom are pitted against those in power, delivering the customary critique. The notable exception is Pavel Lungin's *The Island*, which, with its overt affirmation of the Orthodox faith, was only possible after the collapse of the Soviet regime. The film elaborates on the figure of the holy fool and makes him the protagonist. In this way, I have argued, Anatoly is conceived as a spiritual guide for the new post-Soviet era, embodying the ancient values of Orthodoxy in an exemplary way. While Anatoly is critical of state atheism and of the ecclesiastical offices, he is critical in a somewhat reconciliatory manner, a consequence of him being a conflation of two types: the holy fool and the spiritual father.

A second category of 'stylized holy fools' departs from the strict territory of hagiography and appears instead as cultural reworking. I have shown that such representations have a more acute sense of context, be this recent or eschatologically anticipated. In Soviet cinema direct references to religion were often repressed as a result of state-sponsored atheism, but the proposed worldview endorsed by the holy fool was useful for indicting the mainstream ideology. For instance, the underlying principle of kenoticism renders both protagonists in Todorovsky's *Wartime Romance* and Kaidonovsky's *Kerosene Seller's Wife* at odds with the ideology of the regimented Soviet 'new man'. In Abuladze's *Repentance* the holy fool is employed to explore the traumas of the Stalinist past but also to herald a way forward towards the society's spiritual and ideological renewal, which was soon to be initiated with the advent of the age of glasnost. With the fall of the Soviet Union the stylised fool has been used to turn attention towards the still unresolved spiritual problems of the individual and of society at large as witnessed in *Russian Symphony* and *Ward no 6*, or recent political films, such as in *House of Fools,* where Konchalovsky uses Janna, the innocent patient of an asylum, to question the sanity of a world outside, against the background of the First Russian-Chechen war of 1994–96.

It is arguable that nowhere in Russian cinema do we witness a more devastating critique of modern society than in the films of Andrei Tarkovsky. This arises in part as a consequence of his overtly religious commitments, but is especially due to his creative ability to transform the holy fool figure into a direct opponent of what he perceived as a godless society not only in a Soviet context but also in the West, which he came to know much

better during his final years of self-imposed exile. I have argued that the idea of holy foolishness can be traced throughout Tarkovsky's entire artistic period, starting with *Andrei Rublev*, continuing through *Stalker*, maturing in *Nostalghia* and reaching an apex in *The Sacrifice*. Tarkovsky attempted to render the figure universal by shaking off the particularities ascribed by Russian history and moved towards an existentialist understanding. The result was a holy fool who begins from the position of a secularised person and grows towards a self-styled fool of God. It is not by chance that the self-sacrifices in his last two films *Nostalghia* and *The Sacrifice* lend themselves to an interpretation through the Kierkegaardian category of the absurd. But what was Tarkovsky ultimately after with his holy fools? I have argued that his objective was to counter the cold logic of the rationalism that he believed had engulfed all spheres of life, from religion to technology, in favour of a faith for which nothing was impossible and which had the potential to rescue the world. In spite of the dramatic transformation of the holy fool under Tarkovsky's direction, the figure, animated as it is by apocalyptic pathos, remains essentially framed within a Russian mindset.

I have contrasted Russian cinema with those in France and Denmark: nations that were rooted in a Western Christian cultural tradition. Here the situation is radically different. The holy fool is much less tied to national and denominational identity, and cannot capture the public imagination in quite the same vivid way. On the background of a pessimistic view of human nature, the dominant characteristic of holy foolishness in French cinema is constituted by the notions of love through self-sacrifice and suffering—either self-inflicted or caused by external agents. I have suggested this is due in part to the legacy of a particular Catholic inheritance, revisited and rethought for the French historical context through the doctrine of vicarious suffering promoted by Jansenism and other religious thinkers, including Blaise Pascal, and more recently by Joseph de Maistre. In the world of cinema, I have argued that these themes were most fully developed in the work of Robert Bresson. Examining Bresson's work indicates an obsession with foolish characters in his *Diary of a Country Priest*, *The Trial of Joan of Arc*, and *The Devil, Probably*, this last fool raising particularly problematic ethical issues. Weakness for Bresson is, as it was for Tarkovsky, an important feature, as is the suffering that comes through the body—a body which is imprisoned, beaten or consumed by illness. Bresson's pessimism about human nature, acquired through a latent Jansenism, is taken to a logical conclusion when he confronts Charles in *The Devil, Probably* with the solution of suicide. Bresson's departure from Catholic ethics here should not overshadow his religious interests, since in the universe he fabricated for his characters he is still concerned with the possibility of salvation: through either a quiet or a protesting retreat from the world. Bresson's critique of the modern world is in some ways even more devastating than Tarkovsky's since he suggests there is no hope left for this world, and we must therefore escape from its embrace. The picture of the political and religious state

he created in his last film, *The Devil, Probably* leads towards a hopeless diagnosis: political nihilism, ecological apocalypticism and religion without faith. On this background Charles reiterates, in his personal manner, the cry of Nietzsche's fool. The suffering of the innocent constitutes itself in a criticism of the unjust ways of the world as well as a condemnation of it. This observation applies to a similar extent in Thérèse in Cavalier's homonymous film, Donissan in Pialat's *Under the Sun of Satan* and Félicité in Laine's *A Simple Heart*.

As with the Russian and French cinemas, the idea of holy foolishness in Danish cinema is powerfully influenced by the local form of Christianity: Lutheran Protestantism. The trajectory of this idea is rather sinuous, having been approached by Danish theologians through the concepts of impossibility and the absurd. Kierkegaard's philosophy, I have argued, is crucial for understanding this connection in the Danish context, and illuminates the existential stance of many cinematic characters, from Dreyer's Joan of Arc to von Trier's Bess. These are characters who, belonging to the spiritual plane, are pitted against ecclesiastical structures of power in order to expose the latter's rigidity and false pretence of spiritual authority. There is a significant gendered dimension here. The female holy fools analysed share a common trait in their determination to assume self-sacrifice as an integral part of their existence, aware of its redeeming value. It can be said that while the bodies of the female fools in Danish cinema are destroyed—either physically as is the case of Joan and Bess, or metaphorically as in the case of Babette—they also deconstruct the kind of power that exerts itself through the aggression of the individual. These female holy fools, in a different way to the male ones, offer a glimpse into a world that reveals the advent of the impossible through their strong faith.

With the Dogme 95 movement, which emerged from Danish cinema in the mid-1990s, a new interest in cinematic foolishness was rekindled with important ramifications for the future of the holy fool on screen. The religious connections are less explicit in the case of the Dogme 95 films, but the idiot figure becomes an emblem for the back-to-basics film-making adopted by the directors. Significantly, we have seen that the allegiance of the Dogme directors to a 'Manifesto' and a 'Vow of Chastity' fashioned in religious terminology, represented more than postmodern irony. To support this case I identified the elements that inscribe von Trier's project as drawing from a model offered by the performance of the holy fool, which he then uses to point to a common aesthetics. Unlike their predecessors, one difference that arises with these idiot figures is that they do not present a clear aura of sacredness, except for the prisoner in *In Your Hands*. Rather than a conventional religious form, the Dogme 95 fools push instead towards a transcendental alternative, within the context of a secularized world. For example, in a film such as von Trier's *The Idiots* the trope of idiocy is simultaneously used on two levels: as a critique of politicised disability, and as a search for some inner higher truth. In other Dogme 95 films the interest is also

social: the critical function of fool being to focus on those disfunctionalities that often lie behind human relations and society and point to a better alternative.

The representation of the holy fool that I have identified in European cinema has been as a critic of the social, political and spiritual status quo. These functions of the holy fool are not new, as we have seen in discussions of their pre-modern forms. Yet the intrinsic versatility of the figure has allowed it to develop into a distinct cinematic form, which offers the possibility of expressing contemporary concerns and criticisms of the realities of our present age. It is clear that in Soviet cinema the holy fool figure, even though an emblem of the religious past, was chiefly employed as a vehicle of social and political dissent. Only exceptionally, and at a safe removal from the country's censorship, such as found in the later works of Tarkovsky, was it used for strictly religious purposes, rising beyond immediate political concerns into a critique of a modern civilization that has deemed the spiritual life irrelevant. Here, and in post-Soviet films such as Lopushansky's *The Russian Symphony,* the figure resonates with an anti-rationalist rhetoric characteristic of modern Russian cultural debate. By contrast, in French cinema the concerns are often less political and more emphatically social. Here, the holy fool cuts a solitary figure in a hostile environment: one that gratuiously exerts its destructive violence on his/her disinterested love. More recently, in the Dogme 95 films, the political interest has returned in a new way. The idiot figure, often presenting an uncanny aura, is politicised through being framed in marginalized ways, such as a disabled person as in *The Idiots* or as a migrant as in *Truly Human*. In so doing, the Dogme 95 movement has launched the fool into a twenty-first century context, in a way that loosens its religious context but retains the figure's capacity for transcendence and criticism.

This monograph has argued that the holy fool has proven a versatile and enduring critical device in modern cinema. Given the continued use of the figure as a mode of cultural criticism, it is also important to recognise the way in which the cinematic medium, with its visual power, has revived and transformed the holy fool. One of the most striking aspects of the power possessed by the figure on screen is the visual emphasis that is often placed on the fool's capacity for suffering. Returning to *The First Epistle to the Corinthians,* we saw that Paul placed at the core of his argument the concept of suffering for Truth. In connection with this, the fool for Christ's sake, like its divine model, is inscribed by the tribulations to which he/she is subjected, lending a sense of truthfulness and authenticity. This is important since it can offer an alternative way of legitimating an experience to that of miraculous divine intervention. In most of the films that I have analysed suffering—be it assumed, self-inflicted or inflicted by others—was an important component of the portrayal of the holy fool. Of all the arts, film is particularly well placed to show graphically the reality of the suffering body. It can be revealed as a locus of signification through the particularities of the

narrative and especially the camerawork, as Dreyer exemplarily showed in his *The Passion of Joan of Arc*. As in the case of the hagiographical holy fool gaining credibility by subjecting his/her body to sufferings, the cinematic tormented body dons a revelatory role as the embodiment of a subjective truth which is legitimised by its very suffering. Because it is an event, suffering cannot be deconstructed; rather it exposes the caducity of various ideologies. In the absence of external divine interventions, and in the absence of any dogmatic certainties, suffering testifies to a foolish truth, blurring the boundary between madness and sanity.

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